

Experience in a New Key

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Surfing the Public Square: On Worldlessness, Social Media, and the Dissolution of the Polis

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Abstract: This paper employs Hannah Arendt’s characterization of the *social*, which lacks location and mandates conformity, to evaluate social media’s: a) challenge to the *polis*, b) relationship to the *social*, b) influence on private space, d) impact on public space, and e) virus-like capacity to capture, mimic, and replicate the *agonistic polis*, where “everything [is] decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence.” Using Arendt’s exact language, this paper begins by discussing how she differentiated the political, private, social, and public realms. After explaining how online activities resemble (or not) her notion of the *social*, I demonstrate how the rise of the *social*, which she characterized as dominated by behavior (not action), ruled by nobody and occurring nowhere, continues to eclipse both private and public space at an alarming pace. Finally, I discuss the ramifications of social media’s setting the stage for worldlessness to spin out of control, as the public square becomes an intangible web. Unlike an Arendtian web of *worldly* human relationships that fosters individuality and enables excellence to be publicly tested, social media feeds a craving for kinship and connection, however remotely. Leaving such needs unfulfilled, social media risks to trump *bios politicos*.

Keywords: virtual experiences, freedom, social media, polis, public space, speech, action, worldly, family, netizens

1 Introduction

In light of society’s historic expectations for: 1) the Internet, cavalierly dubbed the “information superhighway” back in 1978 by then-Senator Al Gore, 2) social media’s promise “to give power to the people and to make the world more open and connected,”¹ and 3) cyber-utopianism’s promoting online social movements’ capacity to implement political change, it’s no wonder that a spate of scholars² have turned to Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* (1958) for answers. Grappling with social media’s impact, these scholars are right to imagine that her oeuvre might pose clues as how best to reinstate the private and public, whose border has unwittingly been eroded by cultural norms that arose to optimize online opportunities for publicity. I don’t imagine Arendt being surprised by people’s initially optimistic (overly trusting) approach to social media. Not one for mincing words, I imagine her responding, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you!” In fact, her ongoing concerns about unfettered bureaucracy, mass society, and interest groups, each the result of the *social*’s increasingly eclipsing the *public*, prompted her to carefully delineate these two realms from that of the concomitant *political* and *private*.³

1 Frick and Obertantacher, “Shared is not yet Sharing, Or: What Makes Social Networking Services Public?,” 17.

2 Spaid, “Rewalking the Public Square: Are Social Networking Sites (Just) Social?”; Frick and Oberprantacher, “Shared is not yet Sharing, Or: What Makes Social Networking Services Public?”; Schwarz, “@hannah_arendt: An Arendtian Critique of Online Social Networks”; Rothstein, “Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* and Social Media”; Salikov, “Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Rethinking the Public Sphere in the Age of Social Media.”

3 I view these four realms as a kind of ecosystem whose four realms must be regularly adjusted and balanced; otherwise, the social will knock out competing forces, as if it is an invasive species.

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So as not to subvert her subtle distinctions, this paper begins by using Arendt's exact language to describe her efforts to differentiate these four realms. I then summarize how each relates to particular problems that critics have identified regarding social media. We will then be prepared to evaluate how social media: a) poses a challenge to the polis, b) relates to social, which lacks location and mandates conformity, c) influences private space, d) impacts public space, and e) exhibits a virus-like capacity to capture, mimic, and replicate the *agonistic* polis, where "everything [is] decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence."⁴ While analyzing social media, I double back to Arendt's observation that the social is dominated by behavior (not action), ruled by nobody, and occurs nowhere, and is thus perfectly *disguised* to eradicate private and public space.

Finally, I discuss the ramifications of social media replacing both the private and the political, setting the stage for worldlessness to spin out of control, as the public square unravels into an intangible web. Unlike an Arendtian web of *worldly* human relationships that fosters individuality and enables excellence to be publicly tested, the forces of immaterial fear, spin-doctoring/propaganda, and extraneous distractions increasingly conspire to dominate a *worldless* web of netizens, whose craving for kinship and connection, however far-flung; places *bios politikos* at a remove, further alienating people.

2 Arendt's Differentiating the Social, Public (*polis*), Private (*oikia*) and Political Spheres

2.1 The Social (The Rise of Mass Society)

While the ancients considered the private a precondition for the public, Arendt noticed politics increasingly depending on society, making these realms far less distinct than they once were.⁵ She witnessed the social, which is modeled on tribes, kinship, and community; originating and affecting political power, which had been entirely individualist in the Greek era. In fact, Arendt dated the rise of the social to the emergence of the modern age, "which found its political form in the nation-state."⁶ Just as families amass society, multiple social groups cluster to form mass society. Ultimately, mass society overwhelms the public realm, transforming distinction and difference into "private matters of the individual."⁷

Arendt remarked how Karl Marx's political philosophy uncritically accepted Adam Smith's political economy, whereby "action, speech, and thought are primarily superstructure upon social interest,"⁸ which she called a "communistic fiction" based upon some fantasy of harmonious societal interests. "Since the rise of society, since the admission of household and housekeeping activities to the public realm, an irresistible tendency to grow, to *devour* [emphasis mine] the older realms of the political and private as well as the more recently established sphere of intimacy, has been one of the outstanding characteristics of the new realm."⁹ She worried that like-minded folks banding together to hide behind some political party's platform would totally dilute the freedom and equality afforded the *polis*. Rather than debate the merits of her worry as it pertains to today's political parties, my interest here concerns her insight's relevance for prevailing online tribes, kinship, and communities that social media cultivates so well.

Following the decline of the family and the rise of society, social groups adopted the family structure. Modeled on the unified Greek household, the social fosters conformism, as society "demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one

⁴ Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

interest.”¹⁰ This society ruled by no man arises when “[t]he equality of the members of these groups, far from being an equality among peers, resembles nothing so much as the equality of household members before the despotic power of the household head. [E]xcept that in society, where the natural strength of one common interest and one unanimous opinion is tremendously enforced by sheer numbers, actual rule, exerted by one man representing the common interest and the right opinion, could eventually be dispensed with.”¹¹

As Arendt astutely pointed out, this anonymous nobody (whether the opinion of polite society or statistically-identifiable economic interests) can “turn out to be one of [the] cruelest and most tyrannical”¹² rulers. Replacing the *action* of the *polis* with expected *behaviors*, society imposes “innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.”¹³ By contrast, members in the *polis* constantly distinguish themselves, so as to demonstrate their superior skills. Social status (rank/title/function) risks to replace the public’s individualized excellence. In contrast to meaningless status, she emphasized that “the meaningfulness of everyday relationships is disclosed not in everyday life but in rare deeds.”¹⁴

The rise of mass society transformed “housekeeping and all matters pertaining formerly to the private sphere of the family” into collective, nationwide concerns, shifting economic activities to the social realm, ruled by impersonal, worldless bureaucracies.¹⁵ Given the social’s expansion following labor’s emancipation, the social realm has “made excellence anonymous, emphasized the progress of mankind rather than the achievements of men, and changed the content of the public realm beyond recognition,” but it has not “been able to annihilate the connection between public performance and excellence.”¹⁶ Arendt warned that “no activity can become excellent if the world does not provide a proper space for its exercise. Neither education nor ingenuity nor talent can replace the constituent elements of the public realm, which make it the proper place for human excellence.”¹⁷

2.2 The Public

Unlike the worldless social, whose ethereal constituents impart an expansive agenda, “everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity.”¹⁸ Simply put, appearance constitutes reality. As “compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized, and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance.” As the public realm declined, the “intimacy of a fully developed private life” expanded, intensifying “the whole scale of subjective emotions and private feelings” at the “expense of the assurance of the reality of the world and men.”¹⁹

As Arendt observed, there are a “great many things which cannot withstand the implacable, bright light of the constant presence of others on the public scene; there, only what is considered to be relevant, worthy of being seen or heard, can be tolerated so that the irrelevant becomes automatically a private matter.”²⁰ She remarked how worldless “love can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes

¹⁰ Ibid., 192.

¹¹ Ibid., 192-193.

¹² Ibid., 193.

¹³ Ibid., 194.

¹⁴ Ibid., 194.

¹⁵ Ibid., 188.

¹⁶ Ibid., 198.

¹⁷ Ibid., 199.

¹⁸ Ibid., 199.

¹⁹ Ibid., 199.

²⁰ Ibid., 200.

such as the change or salvation of the world.”²¹ She claimed that the French cherish their homes as a result of “the decay of their once great and glorious public realm,”²² yet noted how this rather enlarges the private, while nullifying the public.

For Arendt, the public constitutes a shared world, whether artifacts or affairs, permanent things fabricated by humans for other humans to enjoy long term. “What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them.”²³ She concluded, “If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men.”²⁴

What we have in common with those who came before us and those who will come after is the common world. “[T]he common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die.”²⁵ Historically, human beings entered the public realm specifically because they wanted something “more permanent than their own earthly lives.”²⁶ So long as society equates status and monetary rewards with public admiration; the *polis*, which was originally free from urgent needs will become the sphere where the “subjective pangs of hunger are more real than the ‘vainglory’, or need for public admiration.”²⁷ “As distinguished from this ‘objectivity’, whose only basis is money as a common denominator for the fulfillment of all needs, the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects.”²⁸

By contrast, mass society resembles in effect radical isolation. “If the sameness of the object can no longer be discerned, no common nature of men, least of all the unnatural conformism of a mass society, can prevent the destruction of the common world, which is usually preceded by the destruction of the many aspects in which it presents itself to human plurality. This can only happen under conditions of radical isolation, where nobody can any longer agree with anybody else, as is usually the case in tyrannies. But it may also happen under conditions of mass society or mass hysteria, where we see all people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor. In both instances, men have become entirely private,”²⁹ and to live in an entirely private world is to be deprived of reality. “[M]ass society not only destroys the public realm but the private as well, depriving men not only of their place in the world but of their private home, where they once felt sheltered against the world and where, at any rate, even those excluded from the world could find a substitute in the warmth of the hearth and the limited reality of family life.”³⁰

2.3 The Private

Unlike the “fiercely agonal *polis*,” the private realm offers a refuge, where its inhabitants, who are neither free nor equals, contend with the necessities of life, “driven by their needs and wants.”³¹ They acquire/maintain properties, give birth, raise families, provide nourishment, conduct business, and earn income in

²¹ Ibid., 200.

²² Ibid., 200.

²³ Ibid., 201.

²⁴ Ibid., 202.

²⁵ Ibid., 202.

²⁶ Ibid., 203.

²⁷ Ibid., 204.

²⁸ Ibid., 204.

²⁹ Ibid., 205.

³⁰ Ibid., 205-206.

³¹ Ibid., 186.

private (*oikia*). The private realm not only leaves space for *oikia*, but “exists for the sake of the ‘good life’ in the *polis*.”³² Regarding Greece, Arendt observed, “What prevented the *polis* from violating the private lives of its citizens and made it hold sacred the boundaries surrounding each property was not respect for private property as we understand it, but the fact that without owning a house a man could not participate in the affairs of the world because he had no *location* [emphasis mine] in it which was properly his own.”³³

“The *polis* was distinguished from the household in that it knew only ‘equals,’ whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality.”³⁴ Unlike the private, the *polis* is the sphere of freedom and freedom is “exclusively located in the political realm.”³⁵ To be free meant “neither to rule nor to be ruled” so the head of household is only free “in so far as he had the power to leave the household and enter the political realm, where all were equals.”³⁶

Like the social, the private lacks worldly reality. “The subjectivity of privacy can be prolonged and multiplied in a family, it can even become so strong that its weight is felt to the public realm, but this family ‘world’ can never replace the reality rising out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators. Only when things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.”³⁷

2.4 The Political

The social’s roots and roles cannot be conflated with the political, whose very existence first required annihilating those factions favoring kinship. Arendt wrote, “It was not just an opinion or theory of Aristotle but a simple historical fact that the foundation of the *polis* was preceded by the destruction of all organized units resting on kinship, such as the *phratry* [brotherhood] and the *phyle* [tribe].”³⁸ The Greeks recognized the social, but considered it a quality human life shares with animal life, unlike the political which is *fundamentally* human.³⁹ *Bios politikos*, human beings’ unique capacity for political organization stands in direct opposition to one’s private life, “that natural association whose center is the home (*oikia*) and the family.”⁴⁰

Arendt bemoaned the Roman Stoic Seneca’s mistranslation of Aristotle’s *zoon politikon* into Latin as *animal socialis*, since the worldless social stands in stark opposition to private and public spheres, which engender standpoint. Being placeless and hidden, the social epitomizes *worldlessness*, precisely because there is no accountability when people don’t appear “before human beings.” Worldlessness is not entirely negative: Arendt characterized Christian love as a worldless bond that “carries people through the world, a group of saints or a group of criminals” and admired the worldlessness of the Jewish diaspora, whose dispersal she believed had enabled them to stand outside of society (prior to Israel’s establishment).

To depict worldliness (the opposite of worldlessness), Arendt envisioned people united around a table: “To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.”⁴¹ People engaged in world-building engender a “plurality of our experiences and points of view.”⁴² Of all the activities necessary and present in human communities, only

³² Ibid., 192.

³³ Ibid., 186.

³⁴ Ibid., 188.

³⁵ Ibid., 186-187.

³⁶ Ibid., 188.

³⁷ Ibid., 204.

³⁸ Ibid., 183.

³⁹ Ibid., 183.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 183.

⁴¹ Ibid., 201.

⁴² Frick and Oberprantacher, “Shared is not yet Sharing, Or: What Makes Social Networking Services Public?,” 19.

two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called the *bios politikos*, namely action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*), out of which rises the realm of human affairs (*ta tón anthrópon pragmata*, as Plato used to call it) from which everything merely necessary or useful is strictly excluded.”⁴³

Given the political’s late arrival, Arendt first juxtaposed the political against the *prepolitical*, which she assigned to the private sphere. “In Greek self-understanding, to force people by violence, to command rather than persuade, were prepolitical ways to deal with people characteristic of life outside the *polis*, of home and family life, where the household head ruled with uncontested, despotic powers, or of life in the barbarian empires of Asia, whose despotism was frequently likened to the organization of the household.”⁴⁴ The fellowship of the *polis*, whose intent was political in content and purpose, transcended otherwise un-free forms of association brought on by life’s everyday urgencies.⁴⁵ The “whole concept of rule and being ruled, of government and power in the sense in which we understand them as well as the regulated order attending them, was felt to be prepolitical and to belong in the private rather than the public sphere.”⁴⁶

In contrast to the prepolitical era, speech replaced “the specifically human way of answering, talking back, and measuring up to whatever happened or was done,”⁴⁷ thus facilitating persuasion in the *polis*. Politicians were called *rhetor*, since they practiced *rhetoric*, the art of public speaking, which Aristotle defined as the art of persuasion in contrast to *dialectic*, the art of philosophic speech.⁴⁸ Since the *polis* was dominated by action and speech, “finding the right words at the right moment” was considered *action*.⁴⁹ “Whoever entered the political realm had first to be ready to risk his life, and [a] too great a love for life obstructed freedom, was a sure sign of slavishness.”⁵⁰ “[A]bsolute, uncontested rule and a political realm properly speaking were mutually exclusive.”⁵¹

3 Social Media’s Challenge to the Polis

According to technology theorist Evgeny Morokov, “Internet-Centrists” recognize the Internet’s foibles (“digital tools do not always work as intended and are often used by enemies of democracy”), yet they still aim to model the polis on the Internet.⁵² They dream of replacing centralization with decentralization, hierarchies with networks, and experts with crowds. Internet-Centrists claim that “[t]o fully absorb the lessons of the Internet...we need to reshape our political and social institutions into its image.”⁵³

In reviewing cases from Internet-Centrist Steven Johnson’s *Future Perfect* (2012), Morokov counters that centralization actually saved the day for New York City’s 311 Hotline and the “well-organized, centralized, and hierarchical structures that pushed back against entrenched interests” when Porto Alegreans initiated “participatory budgeting” in Brazil. Moreover, he characterizes Occupy Wall Street movement’s decentralization as a failure, since one participant attested that it was so “difficult and time-consuming that key players” only showed up for “side conversations, informal gatherings” and meetings to plan public events. “Using social media...they formed an invisible guiding hand that simultaneously got [expletive] done, avoided accountability, and engaged in factional battles with each other.”⁵⁴

Moreover, Alexy Salikov’s research points to what Arendt described six decades earlier as “radical isolation,” so social media hardly links people as its adherents claim:

⁴³ Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, 183.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 184. Arendt’s remark that Asian empires are organized like households suggests a reference to Confucius.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 219, footnote 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁵² Morokov, “Why Social Movements Should Ignore Social Media.”

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Some researchers note the growing fragmentation and isolationism in the networked public sphere (Bright, 2018; Dahlberg, 2007; Papacharissi, 2002; Sunstein, 2009): social media has not only been destroying some boundaries, it has been also creating new ones. Social network sites maintain the shaping of different communities based on the interests, views and values of those members who prefer to remain within their group, and do not seek to influence the general agenda or to be a part of universal public sphere. As some empirical studies show (Colleoni, Rozza, Arvidsson, 2014; Gaines, Mondak, 2009; Garcia et al., 2015), social media tends to contribute to the fragmentation of public discourse in many ways, which in turn leads to what Cass Sunstein and some other social scientists characterize as the “balkanization” of the public sphere (Sunstein, 2008), and to the development of parallel communities whose members can sometimes cultivate extreme views and do not seek to interact with representatives of other groups (Rasmussen 2016, p. 74). These groups tend to be marginalized by the mainstream public sphere, which leads to their further isolation.⁵⁵

Given these points, it sounds immensely fruitless to view social media as the new *polis*.

4 Social Media and Information Distribution

Ever since the widespread availability of the Internet in the late ‘90s, people increasingly perform previously public activities such as shopping, making travel arrangements, earning degrees, conducting library research, reporting the news, dating and playing online games in the privacy of their home *sans* spectators. Sometimes, such acts are even carried out under the guise of avatars, or non-existent personae. It goes without saying that net *experiences* engender *net-entities*, thinking bodies divorced from sensorial responses and moral obligations familiar to conducting one’s affairs in public, where actions deemed honorable (or not) occur. Such private events contest Arendt’s view that “[l]iving beings, men and animals, are not just in the world, they are *of the world*, and this [is] precisely because they are subjects and objects –perceiving and being perceived at the same time.”⁵⁶

However pertinent, most online activities dispense with perceiving publics, enabling authors to ignore and/or override audience reactions. When instant messaging a customer service representative, in lieu of talking on the phone, one may wonder whether one’s overly obedient interlocutor isn’t rather a “bot,” pre-programmed to respond to every potential statement. Even when sites welcome comments, postings tend to spark discussions among readers, rarely requiring the author to weigh in, leaving the imperceptible author unaccountable for his/her words. Such forums may benefit those too shy to avail views otherwise, but they also engender opportunities for manufacturing ignorance, as anonymous contributors post impressions that feign truthfulness. While googling seems to aid one’s ability to discern truths from myths, it simultaneously admits ever more myths, compounding the difficulty of navigating this sea of unreality.

In this era of “Please leave your comments here,” the gut reactions of particularly “peevd” responders weigh heavily as popular opinion and risk influencing those who have yet to weigh in. For example, President Obama’s first-year approval rating (57%) was on par with that of Reagan’s (57%) and higher than that of Clinton (49%), yet private interests conspired to spread the view that most Obamites were entirely fed up with his inexpressive professorial cadence and broken campaign promises, though his public approval was entirely normal for first-year presidents.⁵⁷ Perhaps there needs to be greater analysis of how independent the “independents” really are and whether they are multiple- or one-issue voters. To declare oneself an “independent” voter sounds free, but those who are one-issue voters are not, since their satisfaction, like that of tribal voters, reflects the accomplishment of particular tasks.

Most Arendtian scholars assume that she would dismiss disembodied minds conducting interpersonal activities online in the absence of other human beings. Not surprisingly, one of the perennial criticisms of social media is that it is *only* social, yet its purveyors always insist that its users do much more. Even so, the term “slacktivist” was invented to account for the way people click “like,” yet contribute nothing, what Slavoj Žižek considers confusing “interpassivity” with “interactivity.”

⁵⁵ Salikov, “Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Rethinking the Public Sphere in the Age of Social Media,” 90.

⁵⁶ Arendt, “Thinking,” *The Life of the Mind*, 20.

⁵⁷ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/125096/obama-averages-approval-first-year-office.aspx>

Anticipating Mark Zuckerberg's cluelessness regarding social media's negative cultural influence, Arendt wrote that every "appearing thing acquires, by virtue of its appearingness, a kind of disguise that may indeed- but does not have to- hide or disfigure it. Seeming corresponds to the fact that every appearance, its identity notwithstanding, is perceived by a plurality of spectators."⁵⁸ The Internet facilitates hiding, as many activities occur anonymously and in the "shadows," even as 24/7 online news feeds shine dazzling spotlights on subjects' every move, mimicking Arendt's notion of the public's bright light.

Arendt certainly didn't consider the political systems of her day to bear any resemblance to ancient Greece's respectful wall between the *polis* and *oikia*. The social had already invaded both the public and the private. As mentioned above, she acknowledged today's hybrid whereby "private interests assume public significance that we call society,"⁵⁹ which is incidentally how several Arendtians suggest we treat the Internet. Adam Rothstein suggests that we differentiate "personal private" spaces from public safe spaces, suggesting for example, that people manage both locked and unlocked Twitter accounts. These days, a legion of corporate and political lobbyists are paid to influence the *polis*, making its members anything but free, since their urgent need for campaign finances sways their every move. Additionally, private interests increasingly select and finance anything of lasting cultural value (the arts, architecture, films, public art, university research, libraries, and more recently space exploration).⁶⁰

Arendt could not have imagined the role that worldless information distribution would play in 21st Century lives. Even if distracting gossip/hearsay/spin comprises 80% of Internet content/exchanges, at least 10% must be encyclopedic and another 10% meaningful discourse.⁶¹ Contra Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message," no medium capably frames online messages, since all mass media are coeval and co-present, whether print, photographic, video, radio, and television. Suddenly, one has immediate access to the world's newspapers, television channels, radio stations, artists, poets, architecture, tourist sites, sports teams, and netizens. Most of what happens on the net is private information dispersed throughout the unearthly net for all to notice, but never to witness in the flesh.

For good, the net has become the go-to-source for: fact checking news reports (www.politifact.com), tracking alternative perspectives (numerous online news sources), distributing petitions, organizing flash mobs, coordinating relief teams, tweeting disaster details, downloading Institute for Applied Autonomy software to guide demonstrators around police barricades, fundraising for political platforms and campaigns, and assembling individuals with idiosyncratic interests.

Problem is, Internet activities also facilitate one's ability to spin doctor, generate confusion, present opinions that masquerade as true stories, adopt entirely self-interested and purposeful (not free) motives, and broadcast websites that feature editorials pretending to be alternative online newscasts, whether *The Daily Caller*, *Breitbart*, the *Federalist*, or *Information Wars* on the far right; and *Slate*, *The Daily Beast*, *Vox*, or *The Intercept* on the far left.

5 Social Media and the Private Realm

Arendt's specifying human being's natural gift for self-display explains our routine obsession, as we share our lives via youtube, websites, blogs, and social media. She remarked: "To be alive means to be possessed by an urge toward self-display which answers the fact of one's own appearances."⁶² For Arendt, appearances provide access to the "infinite diversity" of the world's appearances, engendering pleasurable experiences, granting access to each person's mortality, as people appear and disappear. I would guess however, that virtual *appearances* are not enough. Appearances, like thinking, must be engaged and

⁵⁸ Arendt, "Thinking," in *The Life of the Mind*, 21.

⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, 189.

⁶⁰ Chang, "Obama Plan Privatizes Astronaut Launchings."

⁶¹ One in every eleven online minutes is spent social-networking. Between 2008 and 2009, there was an 18% increase in online activity and a 63% increase in social-networking activities. Hardly a winner-take-all situation, 57% users navigate multiple sites. "Social Networking Report".

⁶² Arendt, "Thinking," in *The Life of the Mind*, 21.

attached to perceptions in our midst, rather than *images* at a distance; fictive/nonexistent entities to whom we owe nothing, inviting us to click “like/dislike” buttons.

Moreover, users obsessed with gaining ever more publicity from their inane online behavior demonstrate how upping the ante on shamelessness has become the new normal. As sociologist Eva Illouz noted in *Cold Intimacies* (2007), when everyone is primed to outdo the other:

the act of posting a profile allows the Internet [...] to convert the private self into a public performance. More exactly, the Internet makes the private self visible and publicly displayed to an abstract anonymous audience, which however is not public...but rather an aggregation of private selves. On the Internet, the private psychological self becomes a public performance.⁶³

Well, sort of. This performer apparently craves publicity, yet is also in denial about his/her exposure, exemplary of who Illouz would call a “hyperrational fool.” Against Zuckerberg’s better judgment, he once bragged about Facebook’s role in eroding people’s sense of privacy: “People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people - and that social norm is just something that has evolved over time.”⁶⁴

Given that pornography is one of the Internet’s primary profit margins and numerous politicians (and no doubt ordinary citizens) have fallen prey to “sexting” and “revenge porn,” Zuckerberg and his cohorts must admit that social media is especially primed to dare people across the world to say or do things against their better judgment, like an extremely competitive game of international “Truth or Dare.” Frick and Oberprantacher conclude that this “anonymous sharing of information and action cannot possibly generate a public (democratic realm),” since as Arendt noted “action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others.”⁶⁵

Just as Arendt lamented the increasing demand for public admiration, she considered the urgency attended the broadcasting of private activities a sure sign of the lack of political space. If people were free from urgent needs and felt more empowered, no one would feel pressure to become an influencer, let alone Instagram, Facebook or youtube stars. And as Rothstein points out, “[A]ll around the societal network is the violence- mandating certain behaviors, disallowing others, keeping particular work and labor marginal and invisible. The network has become one more factor of the great administration of society.”⁶⁶ Attention being unequally-distributed, Salikov notes:

Another negative tendency developing in the networked public sphere is the inequality and disproportional degrees in attention and influence: the opinions of a huge number of social media users are barely perceptible from the wide audience, while some relatively-small group of popular bloggers get the bulk of attention and influence. That means that although social networking services are mostly open and egalitarian in sense of access and participation, their public discourse is far from democratic, if we understand democracy as the equal distribution of presence and visibility. An opinion of some popular blogger is more visible and therefore carries more weight than an opinion of some ordinary user.⁶⁷

Social media’s Stasi-like practices diminish the private’s capacity to shelter intimate relationships and stories, as anonymous bloggers and twitterites reveal people’s misdeeds, making cancel culture *de rigueur*, while increasing appetites for tell-all books. Yochai Benkler unwittingly identifies the contradictions implicit in the notion of a “networked public sphere”: “the networked public sphere [is] an online platform where active citizens can cooperate and express their opinions and *serve as watchdogs over society* [emphasis mine] on a peer-production model.”⁶⁸ As someone who escaped the Nazis, which likely inspired her to write *On Totalitarianism*, Arendt would no doubt consider watchdogs not only anathema to the polis, but indicative of rampant conformism.

⁶³ Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, 15.

⁶⁴ Frick and Oberprantacher, “Shared is not yet Sharing, Or: What Makes Social Networking Services Public?,” 18.

⁶⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 180.

⁶⁶ Rothstein, “Hannah Arendt’s The Human Condition and Social Media.”

⁶⁷ Salikov, “Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Rethinking the Public Sphere in the Age of Social Media,” 91.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

6 Social Media and the Political Sphere

Arendt juxtaposed the political as a space for freedom, honor, and permanence, against the necessity, shame, and futility familiar to the private. The global interest in social media, with its extraneous distractions that never let the public decide what is “worthy of being seen or heard” is a sure sign that political space is in short supply and that the social dominates the private and the public. While the political insists on persuasion, the Internet encourages non-action, the form of speech whereby banter and chatter matter more than exposing one’s actual perspective. Hardly requiring courage or demanding that one risk one’s life, netizens opt instead to hide behind anonymity or assume some avatar, unlike free participants in the *polis*.

Most significant, the domination of the social ensures that ranks/titles/functions always outweigh actual skills. As a result, there seem to be fewer opportunities to perform “rare deeds” and even fewer earthly places to test said attributes. It’s no wonder that movie stars, who are admired solely for their worldless activities on the silver screen, become instant celebrities. Despite their overt visibility, celebrities are not free participants in the *polis*. Maintaining this visibility requires them to crave publicity, while simultaneously fleeing the annoying paparazzi they flaunt. Approaching celebrities, Internet stars inhabit no less a worldless place, which leads them to thoughtlessly “transform, deprivatize and deindividualize” passions of the heart, thoughts of the mind, and delights of the senses, inevitably eclipsing worldly love’s perdurance.

7 Social Media and Public Space

The public constitutes a shared world of artifacts and affairs fabricated by humans for other humans that have lasting permanence. While most of social media can be considered content created by users for others, which may last online for a very long time, it is neither permanent nor “common” in the sense Arendt envisioned. Today’s institutions that engender endurance and meaning include universities, whose alumni’s memories engender financial commitments, and *monuments* qua human interest stories, such as anniversary parties for the “Miracle on the Hudson” or the book *Three Cups of Tea*. None are *real* in the sense Arendt envisioned, yet their mythical proportions make them unforgettable. In keeping with the significance of information; libraries, archives, and records remain revered. Some societal need to view the arts as “expressive” rather than experimental indicates the social’s domination over the political. Despite the overall loss of worldly things, one could argue that when human-interest stories take precedence over privately-funded public properties, the public outweighs the private.

8 The Ramifications of Social Media

Clearly, the rise of the social, which is dominated by behavior (and not action), ruled by nobody and occurring nowhere, continues to eclipse both private and public space at an alarming pace. If indeed the political is predicated on the private, then the scariest implications of all is that the increasing destabilization of the private (salary stagnation, increased private debt, rising health-care costs, mortgage securitization, and job scarcity) is destined to make the political impossible. The more unstable citizens feel, the less free they are, placing democracy in jeopardy as netizens vie for private interests in social space.

Such instability serves to increase the supply of one-interest “populist” voters. The greater the instability, the less equal people feel, the more netizens vie for power and influence; causing desperate politicians’ to appeal for funds, attention, sound bytes, and publicity from netizens, while pretending to serve the *polis*. Citizens label mass mailings a turn off, yet netizens feel personally *touched* by politicians’ e-mails and text messages.

When persuasion is motivated by self-interest, “right speech” is in jeopardy, leaving miserable, self-interested “behaving” voters to outweigh humane, accountable “active” voters, making it difficult to witness an electorate worthy of honor or excellence. As a result, rants and raves capture the public’s attention,

though this medium, which primarily expresses the last gasp of mindless frustration, only *seems* agonistic. By mimicking the agonistic polis, confrontational netalogues feign freedom, though they are not free so long as they are purposeful, that is, motivated by self-interest. Without a vulnerable body that risks pain and suffering, the agonistic polis, which virtual netalogues replicate, remains beyond our reach, opening the floodgates to greater deception and manipulation.

In attempting to dominate the private and the political, social media has set the stage for worldlessness to spiral out of control, as the public square unravels into an intangible web that manufactures, though it claims to mirror, popular opinion. As Arendt observed, “It is because this one-ness of man-kind is not fantasy and not even merely a scientific hypothesis, as in the ‘communistic fiction’ of classical economics, that mass society, where man as a social animal rules supreme and where apparently the survival of the species could be guaranteed on a world-wide scale, can at the same time threaten humanity with extinction.”⁶⁹ Only a messy pitch for diversity flourishing on the streets, as people reinvigorate public space, can re-cultivate our polis.

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⁶⁹ Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, 197.