

Critical Theory and Social Media: Alternatives and the New Sensibility

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*Submitted to the Philosophy, Politics and Economics Program at the University of Pennsylvania
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors.*

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Date of Submission: May 8, 2018

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Acknowledgments

The process of writing my undergraduate thesis was itself a social endeavor. If it had not been for my family who encouraged me to take on this project, my friends who continuously supported me, my professors who both inspired and challenged me, and my mentors who guided me, this project would never have been completed.

ABSTRACT

Social media platforms are technological communication tools that dominate our social relationships. As we increasingly notice how little control we have over these platforms and how much influence they have on our behavior, the search for alternatives becomes even more pressing. Critical theory is a practical and theoretical framework we can use to develop a qualitative critique of social media platforms, in extension to the large body of work that addresses the quantitatively measurable effects of the platforms. The internet was originally conceived as a space that would open a more communitarian future, but now it has been reduced to a realm dominated by giant corporations like facebook. Critical theory alternatives include structural change recommendations, but they often lack a discussion of what the aesthetics of a new social internet space would look like. By turning to Herbert Marcuse's concept of the "new sensibility," I argue that, if altered, the social media platform space opens up a possibility to combine the practical and the aesthetic and lead us to a radically different social internet space.

Keywords:

critical theory, social media platforms, alternative social media, Herbert Marcuse, aesthetics, new sensibility

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I. Introduction

“The spectacle is not a collection of images but a *social relation among people mediated by images.*” – Guy Debord
Society of the Spectacle

In modern societies, social relationships are now almost inseparable from technology use, to the extent that interactions through social media platforms¹ have become an indispensable need. We have made a need out of social connectivity, yet what exactly constitutes a need? An enlightening categorization of needs can be found in the work of the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who writes in his book, *One-Dimensional Man*, that vital needs are distinct from preconditioned needs. Vital needs include “nourishment, clothing” and “lodging, at the attainable level of culture,” while preconditioned needs are determined by what is “necessary for the prevailing societal institutions and interests.”² Preconditioned needs can be further differentiated into true needs and false needs. “True” needs are those that lead to the “alleviation of toil and poverty.”³ “False’ needs” Marcuse says, “are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice.”⁴ Though these false needs maintain conditions that harm society as a whole, the individuals who seek to satisfy them may very well feel that they are extremely gratifying and stimulating, and thus believe themselves to be blameless. They begin to identify themselves with those false needs, they make them their own through habituation, and in turn, it becomes difficult to differentiate between a true need and a

¹ It is important to point out that though the label “social media platforms” is most commonly applied to a variety of internet applications that facilitate the sharing of multiple forms of media, neither the term “social” nor “platform” are neutral. What is truly social about social media can be placed into endless questioning, and as Geert Lovink notes in *Social Media Abyss*, the term “platform’ was strategically chosen to present the contradictory activities of online services as a *neutral ground* for...users and major media producers, while enabling the collision of privacy and surveillance efforts, community and advertising investments” (Lovink 3).

² Marcuse, Herbert. *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 4-5.

³ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 7.

⁴ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 5.

false one. The success of a false need lies in its appearance of being indispensable, in the enjoyment and utility that it provides. When people become deeply invested in the fulfilment of a particular need, it becomes far more difficult to become aware that it was an imposed need, one that exists outside of vital necessities.

The question of needs is one which forces us to consider how we are to live, for when we start to question what we need, we question what we desire. In turn, what we desire shapes how we live. If we are not to accept the given needs of any time at face value, and we are not to accept “the prevailing societal interest as the supreme law of thought and behavior,” we must place these needs under scrutiny, and examine them according to their degree of “truth” and “falsity.”⁵ That is, taking our current intellectual and material capabilities into consideration, we must explore the extent to which certain needs perpetuate toil, which are characteristic of their falsity, and the extent to which their satisfaction could lead to a more liberated society, which are characteristic of their truth. This is so we may come to a radical break with the “familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things,” so that we may become “more receptive to the potential forms of a nonaggressive, nonexploitative world.”⁶ It is a question of engaging in critique so as to clear the ground of the imagination by removing the necessity of present needs, so that we may imagine a social world that *can* be otherwise, that can actualize alternatives and lead us to a future of human relationships that are more meaningful, more loving, less indifferent. Ultimately this is a democratic activity to engage in, for in questioning needs that are simply accepted as necessary, we undergo a radical questioning of “what, in fact, true needs are.”⁷ In doing so, we recognize the ways in which we have identified with false needs

⁵ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 5.

⁶ Marcuse, Herbert. *An Essay on Liberation*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 6.

⁷ McMahon, James. "Aesthetics, Technology, and Democracy: An Analysis of Marcuse's Concept of the New Sensibility." (*Radical Philosophy Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2013, pp. 141-157), 142.

and have developed a repressed sense of what the world must be like – repressed because we bar certain potentialities of existence from reality, and perhaps even leave them out of our imagination. We actualize a right to free ourselves from repressive needs, to free ourselves from objects of desire which are imposed on us as soon as we come into the world. In order for human beings to experience change, “the need for radical change must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and their passions, their drives and their goals.”⁸ If we never feel a deep and vibrant *need* for change, whatever warnings we receive will remain unattended. Far too often we remain suspended in thoughtlessness.

A need that must be placed into question is the need for social connectivity *through* social media platforms, which today is a need from which it is almost impossible to escape from. A vast majority of our communication takes place not just through physical encounters, but mainly through technological mediation. Just like “water, power or transport, computer-mediated communication has become a public utility: the precondition of social existence. When all your friends and family are online, interactivity is banality.”⁹ The need for social connectivity is now inseparable from the use of technology, from the use of these platforms to “connect” with people all over the world. There are now incoming generations of people who have never witnessed a world that was not inundated by technologically mediated relationships. When faced with this overwhelming reality, the choices are slim. Even if we opt for a romantic vision of a simple life without the burdens of technology, we will still find ourselves living amidst people who do not follow that same vision of life and who are still interacting with each other through social media. Part of what motivates my questioning of social media platforms is my observation of how this

⁸ Marcuse, Herbert. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 3-4.

⁹ Barbrook, Richard. *The Internet Revolution: from Dot-Com Capitalism to Cybernetic Communism*. (Institute of Network Cultures, 2015), 6.

technology dominates the world, how it is welcomed with uncritical acceptance, and how it is indeed a “mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behavior patterns, an instrument for control and domination.”¹⁰ Though part of the objective of this thesis is to show the validity of the latter statement, one merely has to open one’s eyes to see how the use of social media takes over multiple aspects of our lives, how they have placed a blanket of connectivity over our relationships. The devices we use, which allow us to connect to the platforms and which we carry around with us until we go to sleep, have become an extension of our selves and an ingrained part of our memory. If a video of our lives was played back to us at the time of death, what portion of that would consist of images that represented the screen and not the external world?

Platform terminology has also inserted itself into our daily language. To name a few of the ways that technology shapes our social world through social media: every sight has its potential to be “shared” through a picture, every period of waiting can be tranquilized by a scroll down the newsfeed, different places visited may be “liked” or “followed,” new people encountered may be “friended,” and thoughts and opinions may be written in a “status” update. All of our senses are kept fully engaged. What takes place is a “mutual shaping of society and technology: Society constructs and shapes technology...on the one hand and technology impacts and transforms society...on the other.”¹¹ Our technology has “already become an integrated part of people’s lives,” and we can think of it as a separate environment of its own, one which we

¹⁰ Marcuse, Herbert, and Douglas Kellner. *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse: Technology, War, and Fascism*. (London: Routledge, 1998), 41.

¹¹ Allmer, Thomas. “(DIS)like Facebook? Dialectical and Critical Perspectives on Social Media.” (Javnost = The public. 21.2 (2014): 39–55. Print), 42.

direct our attention to multiple times during the day.¹² Through our concerted practices facilitated by technology, we bring into being a very particular culture. Even then, we still tend to think of these platforms as mere communication “tools” that can be picked up and put back down, which gives us the illusion that they are not affecting the way we relate to each other and the way we *see* the world.

At first glance, these tools seem to shape our society for the better, so it is difficult to see how they could be used as instruments of “control and domination.” Such a claim would seem to be an exaggeration at best.¹³ Platforms like “facebook”¹⁴ ground themselves on “ideals rooted in liberal democratic paradigms,” such as “sharing online creativity, community-based social activities, and egalitarian interaction,” otherwise they would not have the appeal and popularity that they have.¹⁵ facebook also states its mission is to give “people the power to build community and build the world closer together” through its interface.¹⁶ We should not be so easily convinced, however. Certainly, the platform enables users to share and produce content, and it also allows them to consume the content others produce, so there’s a semi-participatory character to the network. However, the extent to which it can “build community” and “bring the world closer together” must be put into question and undergo a process of demystification, considering the most recent public revelations on how facebook is able to sway electoral outcomes¹⁷, collects

¹² Boikos, Christos, Moutsoulas, Konstantinos, Tsekeris, Charalambos. “The Real of the Virtual: Critical Reflections on Web 2.0.” (TripleC. 12.1 405–412. Print), 405.

¹³ For the sake of simplicity, the platform I will be primarily referring to the most is facebook, for it is a platform that centralizes many forms of activity and is one that attracts the most users throughout the world. A thorough analysis of all the different social media platforms goes outside of the scope for this essay.

¹⁴ I purposely de-capitalized the name of this platform and present it under parentheses to remove our mental sense of its necessary permanence, a perceived necessity which presents it as a pillar of our social connectivity.

¹⁵ Dijck, José van. *The Culture of Connectivity: a Critical History of Social Media*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 158.

¹⁶ Constine, Josh. “Facebook Changes Mission Statement to 'Bring the World Closer Together'.” *TechCrunch*, TechCrunch, 27 June 2017, techcrunch.com/2017/06/22/bring-the-world-closer-together/.

¹⁷ Madrigal, Alexis C. “What Facebook Did to American Democracy.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 12 Oct. 2017, www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/10/what-facebook-did/542502/.

more data about us than we are aware of¹⁸, and deliberately makes its interface addictive¹⁹. We must take into account how these seemingly innocent platforms may be leading to very clear social externalities, negative effects not reflected on facebook's billion-dollar balance sheets.

It is remarkable to see the entrance of the social media platforms into the social realm with such rapidity, without our capacity to truly examine them with some degree of distance. Rarely do we stop and question how they alter our perceptions of the social – most of public discourse on the topic focuses on the issue of privacy and data. Yet exploring the questioning of this technology and its effect on the social is of absolute necessity, for as Heidegger notes in his “The Question Concerning Technology,” questioning “builds a way” out of crisis.²⁰ In the case of this exploration, it builds a way out of the uncreative environment where a few social media companies provide the good of social connectivity and we remain complicit and complacent in their use, regardless of the negative effects they are revealed to have on us. We imagine there is no other way to direct our technological capacities, and it is extremely convenient just to accept the tools as they are given to us for “free.” Surely, many structural changes can be demanded, as indeed they have been, but I do not wish to place attention solely on the structural aspects of social media platforms. Critique of structure must also be accompanied by an account of what kind of social essence would be actualized by a change in structure, otherwise we fall under the wrong assumption that structural change will by necessity lead to altered consciousness. It is such an account of social essence that I wish to address by grounding myself on the work of

¹⁸ Tiefenthäler, Ainara, et al. “Does Facebook Know You Better Than You Do?” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 Apr. 2018, www.nytimes.com/video/business/10000005838987/does-facebook-know-you-better-than-yourself.html.

¹⁹ Kozłowska, Hanna. “Facebook's Founding President Admitted How It Exploits Human Psychology.” *Quartz*, Quartz, 10 Nov. 2017, qz.com/1126271/facebooks-founding-president-sean-parker-admitted-how-it-exploits-human-psychology/.

²⁰ Heidegger, Martin. *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. (New York: Garland Pub., 1977), 3.

Marcuse, who wrote extensively on the role aesthetics and consciousness play in social change. Structural change of social media platforms, I will argue, must be coupled with a *new sensibility* of the *social* in order for us to actualize new, non-repressive forms of technologically-mediated relationships.

Aside from the most evident and publicized effects that social media platforms have on individuals, whether positive or negative, the questions which are of pressing importance are:

1. What are the regressive and progressive traits of social media platforms as revealed by critical theory?
2. How can we use these platforms (praxis) so that they lead us to a new sensibility (aesthetics), to a liberated experience of the social?

To answer these questions, the methodological approach I will be using is a critical theory dialectical perspective. What is particularly important about critical theory is that it is forward-looking, in that it does not just “accept existing social structures as they are, it is not purely focused on society as it is, but [is] interested in what it could be and could become.”²¹ It also gears analysis towards an ethic of co-operation:

“a specific type of communication and social relationship in which actors achieve a shared understanding of social phenomena, make *concerted* use of resources so that new systemic *qualities* emerge, engage in mutual learning, all actors benefit, and feel at home and comfortable in the social system that they jointly construct.”²²

What is attractive about critical theory is that it focuses on the need to think *qualitatively different* alternatives to the problems we face as a society. It is not only interested in measurement of effects but is also primarily interested in exploring how measured phenomena can be used to articulate the potentials a society could actualize. In applying this lens of analysis to the case of social media platforms, and in using critical literature on social media, my hope is

²¹ Fuchs, Christian. *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*. (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 22.

²² Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*, 41.

to point to ways social media can be altered so that we can move society in a direction that actualizes new co-operative qualities of the social. The primary focus will be to show that social media platforms *can* be changed because they are merely a product of contingent human practices, and that their current form is just one of infinite possible ways to shape them. I will delineate several qualitative characteristics of social media platforms that I consider to be regressive, in order for us to imagine what a negation of such qualities would result in. I then hope to shed light on some of the alternatives that are articulated in critical media scholarship, while remaining conscious of what they are failing to discuss fully. By charting new visions through alternative values of what the social internet space can become, we may see how we *can* develop a *need* for a liberated social internet space, a need to develop a different realm of the social with our technological capacities.²³ I do not claim that there is any final destination we must arrive at. Rather, I wish to provide a critique of social media platforms that pushes us to alter the forms that we are actualizing, so that we may be more open to play with the tools that we have and partake in the ongoing project of transforming the social internet space. When we change our practices, we bring life to new things, even when imaginations of this future have a “utopian” character to them. One could even say that branding theories as “utopian” merely serves to reinforce the status quo, and to declare an impossibility in the possible so that there is no sense of crisis, no place from which critique could spring from. If we look at the present form of the social media platforms, they merely seem to offer utility, but could we alter them to be *uplifted*, to be moved to *act*, to imagine new ways of *being*?

In espousing critical theory, I do not simply mean critical thinking, which often just concerns itself the “criteria of epistemic adequacy” and “skills of formal and informal logic,

²³ McMahon, "Aesthetics, Technology, and Democracy: An Analysis of Marcuse's Concept of the New Sensibility," 157.

conceptual analysis, and epistemology.”²⁴ Beyond using these particular skills of inquiry, critical theory is preoccupied with “social injustice and how to transform inequitable, undemocratic or oppressive institutions and social relations.”²⁵ There are countless studies that speak about the negative effects social media can produce, yet we seem to find ourselves in a strange space where we do not feel empowered to do anything about the structure and form of our primary communication mediums. They are products that are there merely to be consumed. This is where the dialectical thinking that forms part of critical theory comes into play. It is a tool of theory which allows us to look beyond evident explanations and observations of phenomena and allows us to get to a deeper grasp of problems we face together as a society. In understanding, we come to empowerment.

Dialectical thinking identifies the progressive *and* regressive elements that form a part of constructed needs like social connectivity. It is an exercise in the identification of contradictions. This is to say that it allows us to see how a certain phenomenon can have both negative and positive potentials as part of the *totality* of that very same phenomenon, and it allows us to reveal reasons for the necessity of positive transformation.²⁶ Through it, we can recognize that social media connectivity is just one component of modern communication, which ultimately forms part of the larger social process of technological development.²⁷ By thinking dialectically, we can perceive that technology itself is not neutral, as it is often perceived, and that its development can be “progressive and regressive, liberating and repressive...potential and risk.”²⁸ It is

²⁴ Burbules, Nicholas C. and Rupert Berk. 1999. Critical thinking and critical pedagogy: Relations, differences, and limits. In *Critical theories in education*, eds. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler, 45 – 65. New York. Routledge), 46f.

²⁵ Burbules, Critical thinking and critical pedagogy: Relations, differences, and limits, 46f

²⁶ Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*, 21.

²⁷ Marcuse, Herbert, and Douglas Kellner, *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse: Technology, War, and Fascism*, 41.

²⁸ Allmer, “(DIS)like Facebook? Dialectical and Critical Perspectives on Social Media,” 43

grounded on a specific social context which includes economic forces. In an economic context of capitalism where competition reigns supreme, it should be no surprise that technology “steadily increases the power at the command of giant concerns by creating new tools, processes and products.”²⁹ We see today that sites like facebook now have 2.2 billion users and its business has grown “47% year-over-year to \$40 billion” by providing individuals with “free” online tools they can use to connect with others.³⁰ With its purchase of both instagram and whatsapp, facebook is a clear example of a “giant concern” that seeks to dominate the realm of social media connectivity tools.

Though there is an intimate relation between economic forces and the shaping of the social media sphere, for it is the former that often gives rise to the latter, my main interest lies in exploring how such a technological context leads to a particular shaping of social relations, and how the present form of social media platforms merely works to reinforce such a socialization, precisely because it has a stake in the maintenance of the status quo. I am not interested in merely providing an account that maps the measurable effects of social media networks on user behavior, but in following the call Geert Lovink makes in his article “On Social Media Ideology”: it is a crucial time for “critical theory to reclaim lost territory and bring on exactly this: a shift from the quantitative to the qualitative, uncomputable impacts of this ubiquitous formatting of the social.”³¹ If we never start thinking about the *qualitative* impact social media has on our behavior, we end up conforming to quantitatively measuring their negative impact,

²⁹ Marcuse, Herbert, and Douglas Kellner, *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse: Technology, War, and Fascism*, 44.

³⁰ Zuckerberg, Mark. Highlighting quarterly results from 2017. *Facebook*, 31/01/2018, <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10104501954164561>. Accessed 07/03/2018.

³¹ Lovink, Geert. “On the Social Media Ideology.” *e-Flux*, Sept. 2016, www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67166/on-the-social-media-ideology/.

remaining in a space void of alternatives. We fail to notice how certain addictive uses of technology can completely disrupt our being *in* the world.

Taking into consideration the regressive and progressive elements of social relations that play out in the need for social connectivity, I also wish to show, as Christian Fuchs notes in his article “Herbert Marcuse and the Dialectics of Social media,” that though “social media exist only through social relationships that enable sharing, communication, collaboration, and community,” which are progressive elements, they are also at the “heart of the realization of neoliberal performance principles that render social-media platforms the perfect tools for individual self-presentation, individualistic competition, and the individual accumulation of reputation and contacts” which I see as essentially regressive qualities of these platforms, among others.³² This individual-centered mentality however *can* lead to a more liberated society, so long as we free ourselves from the standardization of social performance, from the development of “dependable reaction patterns” and the “performance of pre-arranged functions” which platforms thrive on.³³ This is because at a time when people are startled by the behaviors of others in social media, by the “barbarism” of some of these behaviors, “everyone knows what freedom means, and everyone is aware of the irrationality in the” presupposed “prevailing rationality.”³⁴ That is, in seeing the barbarism in a presupposed rational order, we get a sense of what should be otherwise. This is an opportunity like no other to demonstrate that new ideals or at least a renewal of them can in fact be actualized, that they are not far within the grasp of humanity, that in fact, in face of the many irrationalities of our presumed “enlightened” or

³² Lamas, Andrew T., et al. *The Great Refusal : Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017; 2017. Print), 247.

³³ Marcuse, Herbert, and Douglas Kellner, *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse: Technology, War, and Fascism*, 53.

³⁴ Marcuse, Herbert, and Douglas Kellner, *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse: Technology, War, and Fascism*, 62.

“rational” minds and social networks, we must do so. Technology, left to its own devices and in the hands of those who control its development, will not just automatically move in a direction of progress and liberation if people do not struggle to imagine alternatives and demand radical changes.

Naturally, the question will emerge, what makes us assume that there is some other essence of the social that could be approached through a change of consciousness and practices? What critical theory is often criticized for is that it gives an importance to essence, which could ultimately be used, and has been used, as a tool for domination and legitimation of oppression. However, this essay adopts the Marxist interpretation of Hegelian social essence which establishes essence as co-operation, for “co-operation is something that all humans share,” despite the fact that what often “alienates co-operative potentials” is capitalism itself.³⁵ What needs to be created are “societal conditions... that allow all humans to participate and to have equally realized rights and to *live in equity*.”³⁶ An articulation of the essence of the social creates a tension in our perception of society, the very tension that is required to critique social practices. Without engaging in a conversation about what qualities of the social we value, we essentially fall into an apolitical space, no longer inspired to imagine alternatives to our social practices, complacent to give up struggle in favor of comfort, complacent to just accept social communication tools as they are given to us by social media platform companies. The reason why critical theory assumes that there are universal human characteristics (like wealth, freedom, reason...) that people yearn for is because only “the assumption that there is something positive that all humans have in common allows the envisioning of a state where all humans are guaranteed equal fundamental rights. Such essential conditions are not given and envisioned

³⁵ Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*, 30.

³⁶ Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*, 30.

automatically, they have *historical character* and under given *economic, political, cultural, and technological conditions* they can be reached to a certain degree.”³⁷ This is why it is so important to explore the character of social media platforms, because they *do* affect the way we live together as human beings in our modern technological condition. When we cease to question them, we run the risk of letting these platforms be unaccountable to the public. Tech companies are free to program the platforms as they like, so long as a new scandal about privacy or surveillance does not come out and they have to apologize and make minor adjustments to their policies. Even when such scandals do come out to the eyes of the public, we merely give social media companies a slap on the wrist and we go on using them as they are. Ironically, if we criticize platforms, we often do this through the platforms we criticize. We know that things are not the way they should be, but we do nothing because it seems too difficult and inescapable.

In an effort to show that social media connectivity is by and large a recently developed need which has undergone a process of normalization, and an addictive one at that, it is important to examine the most recent history of the platforms. Such an examination will bring light to the contingency of these mediums, and will help us investigate social “media history through its alternative roots, its forgotten paths, and neglected ideas...”³⁸ By first seeing that things can be otherwise and that we do not merely have to conform to the present forms of social media connectivity platforms, by battling the ahistorical lens through which we are sometimes prone to view reality, we can move to a space where we can rethink how we use these tools, so that we may enrich our present circumstance with a deeper understand of the “social” rather than impoverish it with interactions that we have now made habitual. The space for solutions cannot

³⁷ Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*, 31.

³⁸ Scalabrino, Frank, and Class of 1891 Department of Arts Fund. *Social Epistemology and Technology: Toward Public Self-Awareness regarding Technological Mediation*. (London ;New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016; 2016. Print. Collective Studies in Knowledge and Society), 79.

be found in an uncritical acceptance of technology and in the mere invention of new platforms or apps that help the *individual* use social media in a more responsible way. We do not need a proliferation of “tools.” The responsibility should also not fall upon the individual to merely self-regulate his time spent on social media networks, especially when billions of people engage in them. Instead, we must use an enriched understanding of what we value in the social to search for solutions. Once we do this, we can think of both structural change to the platforms and the actualization of a new essence of the social – the two go hand in hand and they feed into each other. As Marcuse noted in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, the radical transformation of society depends on “change in ‘human nature’ (i.e., in human needs and satisfactions as a foundation of rationality and experience) and in ‘external nature’ (i.e., the environment in which production and preservation take place and in which society is formed).”³⁹ We have developed a social need for a particular communication environment – the social media platform. Thus, there are two things that need to be changed – our human need for these platforms in their present form, and the platforms themselves. These are two elements that must be kept in constant turning.

II. A Brief History of Social Media Connectivity

The culture of social connectivity has only emerged recently. Its success can mostly be attributed to its playing off of democratic ideals of participation, which are also tied to the ideology that all technology is progressive. For the recounting of this brief history, I will be basing my account largely on the work of José Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: a Critical History of Social Media*, where she argues that by “exploring technical, social, economic, and cultural perspectives on social media, we can elucidate how recent changes in our

³⁹ Nun, Nathan. "Practical Aesthetics: Community Gardens and the New Sensibility." (*Radical Philosophy Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2013, pp. 663-667), 663.

global media landscape have profoundly affected – if not driven – our experience of sociality.”⁴⁰ Her account helps us see how the shaping of sociality forms part of the broader development of the internet space. As the internet continues to develop as a medium for social communication, this medium “coevolves with its quotidian users’ tactics” and “it contributes to shaping people’s everyday life, while at the same time this mediated sociality becomes part of society’s institutional fabric.”⁴¹ I do not claim that this is an exhaustive account of the history of social media platforms, which is complex and varies drastically depending on the platform. Rather, my main interest lies in presenting general characteristics of the development of social media networks, to show the primary social desires and ways of seeing that led to the development of platforms. I also wish to point to how we have diverged from these earlier visions of what the internet space would be like.

When information technology and computers started to develop quickly in the early 1970s, they were initially greeted with suspicion. Technology was perceived as an instrument “of control, mostly wielded by Orwellian bureaucratic governments or by giant corporations,” going against the values of the 60s, which included collectivity, community, empowerment, and personal freedom.⁴² These instruments only started being perceived under a new light in the late 70s, when their potentials for liberation were highlighted over their oppressive characteristics. An ad for Apple computers in 1984 “showcased the Macintosh as a tool for user empowerment, casting the company as a rebel amid powerful computer industries and, by implication, positioned the Mac customer as a denizen of counterculture.”⁴³ Technology was advertised as a

⁴⁰ Dijck, José van. *The Culture of Connectivity: a Critical History of Social Media*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.

⁴¹ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity : a Critical History of Social Media*, 6.

⁴² Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity : a Critical History of Social Media*, 9.

⁴³ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity : a Critical History of Social Media*, 10.

tool for the promotion of the public common good against interests that may have used devices as techniques of control and subjugation. It is precisely the framing of technology as a product of communal spirit that made it appealing to the public, and which made it appear as essentially countercultural and as a new sign of the furthering of the ideals of a democratic society.

The introduction of the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1991 advanced the spirit of counterculture, for it was an infrastructure where people could develop their own applications in the web. The internet was an unexplored territory that sparked the most democratic spirits of the imagination. To give a sense of the type of rhetoric that was used to cheer the advent of the WWW, an initial proponent of the internet as a space of liberation claimed that life “in cyberspace is often conducted in primitive, frontier conditions, but it is a life which, at its best, is more egalitarian than elitist, and more decentralized than hierarchical. It serves individuals and communities, not mass audiences, and it is extraordinarily multi-faceted in the purposes to which it is put.”⁴⁴ Read in the context of today, it is easy to see that we have diverged from this vision. At the time, it did seem as though the internet was actualizing democratic values. The term “Web 1.0” is often used to describe the rise of this first generation of the WWW, which despite the spirit of optimism that professed a radical shift in public communication, was mostly confined, “more or less, to e-mail and print.”⁴⁵ The activity of the web’s users was also limited. Most people stayed within the confines of consumption of information, and only a few users had the luxury to use the internet space for creativity and sharing.⁴⁶ However, even this small opening for the emergence of a radical space of participation was taken over by Amazon, Google, and AOL, who shaped the internet to better align it with commercial interests. In an instant, the

⁴⁴ Kapor, Mitchell. “Where Is the Digital Highway Really Heading?” *Wired*, Conde Nast, 14 Dec. 2017, www.wired.com/1993/03/kapor-on-nii/.

⁴⁵ Boikos, “The Real of the Virtual: Critical Reflections on Web 2.0,” 406.

⁴⁶ Boikos, “The Real of the Virtual: Critical Reflections on Web 2.0,” 406.

inspiring vision of “dot communism,” the image of an internet that fostered decentralization, community, and participation, was incorporated and turned into “dot commercialism,” the center of e-commerce.⁴⁷ Eventually, this too collapsed. The advent of new internet companies caused the inflow of financial capital to drive up the “market values of many Internet companies,” driven by a promise of future possible high returns, which overall formed a “bubble” that burst in 2000 when profits failed to hold up to the promises of these market values.⁴⁸ This became known as the dot.com crisis, when many internet startup companies crashed and went bankrupt, and only a few survivors were able to emerge from the ashes and came back to life in “Web 2.0.”

It must be stated that the terms used to signify the different stages of the internet development are not at all neutral, in that they imply that the creation of new companies was by necessity an improvement, an upgraded version of the internet space. Tim O’Reilly, who coined the term “Web 2.0,” stated that a “shakeout” like that of the dot.com bubble burst “typically mark[s] the point at which an ascendant technology is ready to take its place at center stage.”⁴⁹ There was no reason to fear the crash of multiple internet companies, for this meant that new and better technologies were ready to present themselves to the public. The perfect ideological narrative was crafted to meet both the public’s demand for a participatory internet space and investors’ need for reassurance that companies that emerged after the 2000 dot.com crisis were substantially different from those of previous years, that they could indeed bring about “new economic and democratic potentials.”⁵⁰ Once again, the changes in the internet space were based on values of democratization, and some of the values that O’Reilly claimed were characteristic

⁴⁷ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity : a Critical History of Social Media*, 10; Lovink, Geert. *Networks without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media*. (Cambridge, UK ;Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2011. Print), 4.

⁴⁸ Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2014. *SAGE Knowledge*. Web. 8 Mar. 2018, doi: 10.4135/9781446270066), 33.

⁴⁹ O’Reilly, Tim. “What Is Web 2.0.” *O’Reilly Media, Inc.*, 31 Mar. 2018, www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html.

⁵⁰ Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 33.

of Web 2.0 were “radical decentralization, radical trust, participation instead of publishing, users as contributors, rich user experience... web as platform, control of one’s data, remixing data, collective intelligence,” etc...⁵¹ With the presentation of new technologies came a need for justification in terms of benefit for the public and progress toward social change. What all of this amounted to be was a narrative that restored the “confidence of venture capital to invest in the Internet economy.”⁵²

What was supposed to be groundbreaking about Web 2.0 was that it opened the space in the internet for users to have “two-way communication,” that is, they could “‘talk back’ and send messages instantly, whereas previous media had wielded power over their one-way publishing or broadcasting channels.”⁵³ This renewed optimism toward the internet space. Most people heralded the victory of the user and expressed that new applications had finally “exponentially enhanced the natural human need to connect and create.”⁵⁴ What we have inherited from Web 2.0 are the many social media platforms that we see on the internet – facebook, instagram, snapchat, twitter, linkedin, youtube, etc... Now certainly, there is extensive research and commentary on the validity of the claims that social media serves the purposes of giving more power to its users and meeting a user need for connection. However, the point I would like to dwell on is that what seems to be underlying the narratives of the development of social media platforms is a genuine desire for a world that is more cooperative in spirit. This is why applications that ground themselves on the idea of making the world more connected gather so much attention. People’s desire to use social media platforms often stems from a belief that they are serving the common good and that they are effectively bringing people closer together.

⁵¹ Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 32.

⁵² Lamas, Andrew T., et al, *The Great Refusal : Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements*, 248.

⁵³ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity : a Critical History of Social Media*, 10.

⁵⁴ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity : a Critical History of Social Media*, 10

Nevertheless, one must truly question what it means to *connect* with another human being, and question why it is that only a handful of companies control the most popular applications of the internet space. As Lovink questions in his book *Social Media Abyss*:

“A handful of social media platforms dominates the information age... Whereas the original internet ideology still promises open, decentralized systems, *why do we, time and again, find ourselves locked in closed, centralized walled gardens?*... Why are individual users so easily lured into such platforms, then finding them so hard to quit? Is this human nature or simply the wrong design by naïve hippies turned conservative power-mongers? Do we understand the long-term costs that society will pay for the ease of use and simple interfaces of beloved ‘free’ services?”⁵⁵

The initial commotion caused by the internet is always over the idea that it could develop into a decentralized, highly participatory, and ultimately revolutionary space. Even though people certainly perceive it to be this way, what we now see is an internet space dominated by a handful of corporations. Though many scandals regarding lack of privacy and surveillance come to the surface, which bring into question the legitimacy of social media platforms, we are ultimately satisfied with being the ones responsible for controlling our privacy settings and the information we put online. We think we have full control over what we say online, yet we do not realize that we only really have control over what we say when we speak directly to another person, without a technological medium in between. As long as a medium like facebook comes in between the speaker and what is said, we will not fully have control over our voices, and perhaps, our speech will not be free. We do nothing to change the platforms themselves, which seems to show that there is something essential that these platforms are offering us that we believe we cannot do without, otherwise we wouldn't be so hesitant to alter them. Our desire then, is deeply associated with the platforms themselves. Why do we feel incapable, or why do we not even desire to demand change in these platforms, so that they may be more conducive to

⁵⁵ Lovink, Geert. *Social Media Abyss: Critical Internet Cultures and the Force of Negation*. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016; 2016. Print), 37-38 (italics for emphasis)

visions of positive social change, as they had initially promised to do? More simply, why do we not desire to be more creative with our use of the internet space? We work tirelessly to exert our wills in many other aspects of our lives, but when it comes to the foundational tools of communication in our modern society, we are complacent with allowing large corporations to provide us with the service of social connection, to hand off this “good” to us. Surely, Web 2.0 is “easy to use, it facilitates sociality, and it provides users with free publishing and production platforms that allow them to upload content in any form, be it pictures, videos, or text,” yet they come at the price of shaping the social without us ever feeling a sense of ownership over this process.⁵⁶

A point that Dijck makes which is of particular importance and which may serve to answer the questions posed above, is that part of the success of social media platforms can be attributed to the way they have used the human value and desire for *connectedness*, or belonging, for the sake of developing mediums that promote *connectivity*. First, when social media platforms claim that they are “social,” they bring about associations with participation, an implication that social media networks “are user centered and that they facilitate communal activities...”⁵⁷ Indeed they might serve these functions, but ultimately, the use of these platforms doesn’t just promote interactivity – through interactivity, “networks also affect what individuals do and think.”⁵⁸ This goes back to the idea that while society may shape its tools for social connectivity, these tools also have a direct effect on our perceptions of the social. There’s certainly human connection taking place in social media networks, but this connection comes at the price of “making sociality technical.”⁵⁹ Now, if we want to maintain the use of technology

⁵⁶ Lovink, Geert, *Networks without a Cause : A Critique of Social Media*, 5.

⁵⁷ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: a Critical History of Social Media*, 11.

⁵⁸ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity : a Critical History of Social Media*, 11.

⁵⁹ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity : a Critical History of Social Media*, 12.

that does promote greater connectedness among human beings and we do not want to turn to offline romanticism, then perhaps we cannot avoid making sociality technical in one way or another. However, we must specify that there is a difference in meaning between connectedness and connectivity. When we say we are connected, we evaluate connections based on “their quality and status rather than their quantity” – something about our connection with the other which makes us feel particularly bonded to them.⁶⁰ When we refer to connectivity in social media platforms, the sort of activity that takes place on facebook, we usually refer to the action of “friending” another individual, and this action has come to “designate strong *and* weak ties, intimate contacts *as well as* total strangers.”⁶¹ Even beyond whether or not connectivity means friending a close friend or a stranger, connectivity is the connectedness that companies like facebook have made *salable*. The “golden egg” of social media companies is that peer-production makes people feel that they are more “connected” with each other, but peer-production also generates “a valuable by-product that users often do not intentionally deliver: behavioral and profiling data.”⁶² This form of data is catered to advertising companies, and it is how facebook makes most of its profits, allowing advertising companies to target consumers directly based on their profiles.⁶³ This is at the heart of the dilemma:

“Obviously social media services can be both intensely empowering and disturbingly exploitative; sociality is enjoyed and exercised through precisely the commercial platforms that also exploit online social activities for monetary gains.”⁶⁴

Furthermore, as the “social” is used to generate profits for social media platforms, it has become a neutralized term, “a special effect of technological procedures, written into protocols and

⁶⁰ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity : a Critical History of Social Media*, 13.

⁶¹ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity : a Critical History of Social Media*, 13.

⁶² Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity : a Critical History of Social Media*, 15.

⁶³ Collins, Keith, and Larry Buchanan. “How Facebook Lets Brands and Politicians Target You.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 11 Apr. 2018, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/11/technology/facebook-sells-ads-life-details.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur.

⁶⁴ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity : a Critical History of Social Media*, 18.

distinct from” truly partaking in a community. In modern times, the social signifies a mere “feature” of technology in our day-to-day language, and we never fully realize how attaching the word “social” to media was a clever product of “business management strategies” to make the applications of Web 2.0 popular.⁶⁵ As we have seen, this is not how the internet space was originally imagined, which allows to see that what seems necessary is actually mere contingency, and what we think is impossible is actually possible, if only we build the need and demand for alternatives.⁶⁶ If we think about how someone from the start of Web 2.0 would view the current age of social media platforms, that person would probably not have imagined a world where over 2 billion people partake in a single platform and use it to post and consume content every day – that person would have believed such a world to be impossible. This model is what we buy into today, for “the maintenance of existing contacts, friendships, and family relations, social relationships over spatial distances, information and news, finding and renewing old contacts, sharing photos and other media, and establishing new contacts” are real goods that social media platforms provide and that we now feel we absolutely *need*.⁶⁷

III. Regressive Characteristics, Towards Alternative Social Media

“An image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an *appearance*, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved – for a few moments or a few centuries. Every image embodies a way of seeing.” – *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger

When it comes to critique, the main question one comes across is, “What then, is the alternative?” As Herbert Marcuse put it, there is an essential flaw in this question. It demands a grand vision of alternatives when what one should first consider is that providing an alternative inside a current system of relations would not actually be providing one – it would only serve to

⁶⁵ Lovink, *Networks without a Cause : A Critique of Social Media*, 7.

⁶⁶ Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2010), 17.

⁶⁷ Allmer, Thomas. *Critical Theory and Social Media : Between Emancipation and Commodification*. 144 Vol. Abingdon, Oxon; (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015; 2015. Print. Routledge Advances in Sociology), 163.

state the belief in an alternative while still remaining within the terms of a non-alternative. The first step to form an alternative is to refuse the prevailing course of action, and in that refusal the alternative slowly emerges and builds itself up through the interrelated practices of those who desire to form it. At the same time, this refusal cannot be a demand in the opposite direction to completely get rid of present structures in the belief that new structures will naturally arise. The demand for an alternative and the subsequent course of action is perfectly articulated by Marcuse in the following passage:

“What kind of life? We are still confronted with the demand to state the ‘concrete alternative’ [...] However the question cannot be brushed aside by saying that what matters today is the destruction of the old, of the powers that be, making way for the emergence of the new. Such an answer neglects the essential fact that the old is not simply bad, that it delivers the goods, and that people have a real stake in it.”⁶⁸

As has already been discussed, social media platforms have wide appeal because they facilitate human connection. Nevertheless, they promote certain characteristics of the social while they also reduce our capacity to actualize others. The development of platforms is tied to ideals of community and a *need* for belonging, which they actualize to a certain extent, but certainly not as much as they could. We will always have to face the reality that the entities behind the networks are large profit-generating corporations and that their primary deliverables are precisely just that – profits for shareholders. Beyond, and yet still within the economic and political, what has not been discussed fully are what we may consider to be “bad” about our *experience* of these platforms, taking into consideration how they affect the way we think about *space*. When making these sorts of observations, it is important to keep in mind that by no means do I seek to make totalizing claims about what all people do when they engage in in social media networks. I merely want to bring light to aspects which we may not be used to see in a particular

⁶⁸ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 86.

way, and in doing so the observations about social media behavior may resonate with people and generate a desire to develop other means of social communication in the internet space. Through critique, we may examine “social institutions, ideologies, discourse (ways of constructing and reasoning about the world through the use of a particular language) and forms of consciousness in terms of *representation* and *domination*,” so that we may then explore “if and how these constrain *human imagination, autonomy, and decision-making*.”⁶⁹ Then, by knowing how social institutions (like social media) shape our consciousness, we may imagine ways to liberate it and actualize other forms of the social internet space.

On the levels of interaction, social media platforms foster tribalism and separation. As present social media networks stand, a vast majority of the content on these platforms tends to be linked in one way or another to reporting on world events. On facebook in particular, depending on what news sources one follows, there will always be the notification of a recent article reporting on breaking news. Even if one does not follow a news source on the platforms, one will still come across another friend’s content who posts on a particular issue. What these platforms often work towards is to spark a visceral reaction in users when they come across other people’s content, so that they will feel enraged or upset and will be obliged to declare a status or write an opinion in response. This may be a wider characteristic of present-day news sources whose headlines tend to focus on the inflammatory statements of world leaders or on upsetting news about violence so that people will read them. Reactionary posts come in the form thoughts that are not likely to have been processed over a long period of time or reflected upon with contradictory evidence. This is further facilitated by the comforts of a technological veil, a veil that hides the subject of aggression. What this then actualizes in the social space is a tribalism of

⁶⁹ Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*, 20.

opinion, where the most immediate and reactionary thought is what counts. Social media forms the illusion that people are one-dimensional and full of conviction, unable to consider thoughts that may prove anything to the contrary. The only responses to someone's posts are likely to manifest themselves in the comment box, and even then, people are unlikely to respond with the same degree of ambiguity and lack of conviction that they would display if they were encountering the person face-to-face. Even when the person we interact with is someone we know, it is difficult to fully understand this person through their activities online, for connection in social media often "entails a simple effect of machinic functionality," as opposed to a qualitatively different feeling of connectedness with another person.

An easy solution to this would be to include a feature on the post that allows you to video-call the person directly when you feel the need to respond to their comments. Even then, who would actually do this in the current social media platforms? It seems that the thrill of reacting on the comment box is that it is reactionary – it makes us feel that we are standing up for something against the other, and in doing so we feel some degree of self-worth, a sense of purpose, meaning, and identity. That is why this sort of behavior has some tribal characteristics to it, in the sense that we defend our own tribe (people who think like us) against others. Once there is a real opportunity to respond intelligently to another person's post and encounter the person face-to-face, the thrilling visceral reaction suddenly dissipates. We no longer feel as convicted to prove the other person wrong, and we *open* ourselves up to the Other for dialogue. Who can say that what we are looking for in social media platforms is dialogue with another person who thinks differently, which takes incredible mental energy and understanding so as to not spark a fight or protest? What seems to be the case, as occurs when polemical news circulate in the media space, is that people "unfriend" others who do not think similarly or ask others to

delete them from their “friend” circle. We desire to make ourselves immune to difference, to contrasting viewpoints that may decentralize our own opinions. As Lovink notes in *Social Media*

Abyss:

“The online system is not designed to encounter the Other (despite or evidenced by, the popularity of online dating sites). We remain amongst ‘friends’. The promise of social media (if there is one) is rather to design and run defensive systems that can recreate the community feelings of a lost tribe, in computer generated informality.”⁷⁰

When we post a reaction to a particular article or recent news notice, we usually are not seeking to actually encounter other people by publishing our own opinion. We merely seek to get some sense of who other people are based on their reactions – we are only interested in categorizing the Other under the most basic categories possible – either a person is a “friend” or an “enemy.” When we post on facebook, the moment of greatest thrill comes when we put our opinion out into the world and await the possible reactions to the post. A sense of validation comes from the mere liking by other people, that validation which says, “these people have liked my post...they must both share my opinions and think like me...my opinion was worthy to be shared.” It has the characteristics of a game that awaits the reaction of the other and enjoys the uncertainty of not knowing how a post will be received. When the post is validated by someone who has a similar way of viewing the world, we feel ourselves to be even more righteous. This is a social *game*, but it is not an encounter with other people in their holistic personality – it is impossible for this to be fully represented in the online sphere. What is truly represented is a mere caricature of a person – a person distinguished by the way they lean with respect to certain issues. That social media platforms take on the characteristic of a game is further reinforced by comments that came from a former facebook executive, who said that facebook designed its interface to maintain “a social-validation feedback loop” to consume as much of our attention as

⁷⁰ Lovink, *Social Media Abyss: Critical Internet Cultures and the Force of Negation*, 41.

possible.⁷¹ These feedback loops function through symbolic punishment and reward, so that we get a thrill when someone likes our posts and feel deeply insecure when we receive no attention.⁷² This is what is meant by claiming that social media platforms give one the feeling of a “lost tribe,” partly because it is conducive to the mentality that says, “I must fight with others, prove to them that I am in the right...I must post to align with those who think like me.” It is in this “friend” and “enemy” distinction of the reaction to a post that the greatest type of tribalism is manifested.

When suggestions are made to completely disconnect from social media platforms, many feel that they are risking “social death and cannot afford to be left out in this informal reputation economy – that is why they feel forced to follow the herd” and keep the social platforms and their own behavior as they are.⁷³ The tribal behavior that takes place online fulfills people’s needs for belonging but in a way that necessitates the putting down of the Other. If we are truly seeking to advance in our ways of thinking and to conceive of the internet as a space to actualize radical values of cooperation, then we must seek to fill people’s needs for belonging in a way that is not oppressive, that does not necessitate the denigration of an Other who thinks differently. We must in fact promote the understanding of the Other in a way that recognizes ambiguities in thought, and that recognizes the struggle to find grounding in a world that is always confronting us with evidence that contradicts our most firmly-held beliefs. In reality, when we encounter someone who thinks differently, and we engage in a conversation with them, there is always room for *play*. There is more recognition that the Other, like us, may not be so

⁷¹ Allen, Mike. “Sean Parker Unloads on Facebook: ‘God Only Knows What It’s Doing to Our Children’s Brains.’” *Axios*, 9 Nov. 2017, www.axios.com/sean-parker-unloads-on-facebook-god-only-knows-what-its-doing-to-our-childrens-brains-1513306792-f855e7b4-4e99-4d60-8d51-2775559c2671.html.

⁷² Lanier, Jaron. “How we need to remake the internet.” TED. April 2018. Lecture.

⁷³ Lovink, *Social Media Abyss: Critical Internet Cultures and the Force of Negation*, 41.

convinced as we may think. This is not something that comes across in the restricted conversations that take place in the comment box. We must open ourselves to play with the opinions and thoughts of the Other if our own thought is not to remain in a self-righteous conviction – we must be flexible with the rules of our “social game,” constantly open to rework those rules when they encounter an Other who challenges them.

With respect to time, social mediums perpetuate an oppressive form of the internet by petrifying us. What I mean by this is that they give us a certain sense that reality cannot be otherwise – we must orient ourselves in the world based on what we see in these mediums. The more we consume content on social media platforms, the more our lives seem to be fixed in boxes with no way of escape and the more our social relations assume a “reified objectivity,” a concreteness which gives off the illusion that there are no other dimensions of experience.⁷⁴ As Lovink notes:

“Constant exposure to real-time interactive media results in a poor sense of *time* and attention fatigue. Constant overconsumption of specialized knowledge can also lead to a distorted sense of *hyper-reality*.”⁷⁵

We assume that we constantly need to know what our friends are doing and what is going on in the world, and in many ways, this can be good because it can bring our attention to things we would not have known otherwise had we not been connected to platforms. Nevertheless, we must question the effects of over-consumption of information, which leads to, in a strange way, to a closing of the universe, a closing of what we consider to be possible and achievable. It gives us a sense of *hyper-reality*, which is reinforced by feeding our senses with the content that is promulgated in the social media spaces. For Marcuse, “the existing society is reproduced not only in the mind, the consciousness of men, but also in their senses; and no persuasion, no

⁷⁴ Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, 7.

⁷⁵ Lovink, *Social Media Abyss: Critical Internet Cultures and the Force of Negation*, 32 (italics for emphasis).

theory, no reasoning can break this prison, unless the fixed *petrified* sensibility of the individual is ‘dissolved.’”⁷⁶ It is this petrified sensibility which should be overcome by modifying the social media platforms as they are, which ultimately means that we will modify the way we sense. Social media platforms make use of the stimulation of our senses, and in turn, they affect what we can imagine, for imagination has always had an intimate relation with sensation. More and more so, we are moving in the direction of an audio-visual world because of the technology that we have at our disposal.⁷⁷ As I pointed out earlier in the brief history of social media, we must be conscious of how social media are techno-social, which means that the social feeds into the technical and the technical into the social. As Franco Berardi notes in *The Uprising*, this is why as “the connective modality” spreads in social life, which is the network, humans are “subjected to a process of mutation that involves the faculties of attention, processing, decision, and expression” that makes us adapt to the technology of these platforms.⁷⁸

A term we may give to the general structuring of social media platforms is *standardization*, for they standardize our social performances. Social media platforms function by creating a norm for social behavior. In describing the creation of norms and normalization, Michel Foucault noted how the “power of normalization imposes homogeneity” as a general rule, while still allowing for “all the shading of individual difference.”⁷⁹ Similarly, in social media platforms, we have the freedom to post what we wish to and express our individuality, but

⁷⁶ Nun, "Practical Aesthetics: Community Gardens and the New Sensibility," 667.

⁷⁷ A recent New York Times article titled “Welcome to the Post-Text Future” heralds in such phase of internet culture, one where “sounds and images become the universal language.” Interestingly enough, the article mentions dangers, including that our understanding of the world around us may drastically change if we just consume pictures and sound, yet it still seems to write about this change as if it were entirely inevitable, and asks no compelling questions about alternatives: “... what are we going to do? There seems no going back now.”: Manjoo, Farhad. “Even the Tech Elite Are Worrying About Tech Addiction.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 Feb. 2018, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/09/technology/the-addiction-wrought-by-techies.html.

⁷⁸ Berardi, Franco. *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*. 14 Vol. (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2012. Print. Semiotext(e) Intervention Series), 123.

⁷⁹ Foucault, Michel, and Paul Rabinow. *The Foucault Reader*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 197.

this always occurs within the limits of the homogenous platform. Take, for example, the range of reactions that are available for us. On facebook, the set of immediate reactions to posts that are available are “like,” “love,” “haha,” “wow,” “sad,” and “angry.” Sure, we could demand facebook to increase the range of possible reactions, but what good would this do? The term emotion cannot be used to describe such reactions, for we never truly *feel* the reactions we choose to use on facebook. Rather, our reactions are always reduced to a standardized digital decision – whether to click or not. The reaction possibilities are meant to portray emotions in communication, but instead, they reduce emotion to the level of the symbolic. This reminds me of a passage from Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, where she notes that if communication was merely about conveying information, then it could be replaced by “sign language, which then might prove to be even more useful and expedient to convey certain meanings, as in mathematics and other scientific disciplines or in certain forms of teamwork.”⁸⁰

Beyond post reaction buttons, it seems that the communication that takes place in social media platforms is one that is severely limiting, and it works constantly on the need to say something immediate and generate content in the newsfeed. We are responsible for a certain production of the social – facebook provides the means and we constantly go on communicating, without ever questioning to what end (and perhaps there is no end, but only the anxious desire to be known, to make oneself heard). Though Jean Baudrillard wrote his essay “The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media” in the 1980s, his description for why the constant presence of an excess of information is obscene applies to the behavior that is exhibited in social media platforms, and it is worth quoting the whole passage. Social media platforms, we could say:

“...exhibit this redundancy of the social, this sort of continual voyeurism of the group in relation to itself: it must at all times know what it wants, know what it thinks, be told about its least *needs*... The social becomes obsessed with itself; through its auto-

⁸⁰ Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), 117.

information, this permanent autointoxication, it becomes its own vice, its own perversion. This is the real obscenity. Through this feedback, this incessant anticipated accounting, the social loses its own scene. It no longer enacts itself; it has no more time to enact itself; it no longer occupies a particular space, public or political; it becomes confused with its own control screen. Overinformed, it develops in-growing obesity. For everything which loses its *scene* becomes for that reason *ob-scene*.⁸¹

It is interesting to contemplate how we now take the term *social* media for granted, which validates the fact that what we consider to be social has already been absorbed by the media. We partake in daily activities to constantly know what other people think, what they see, what they do, what they like, and we are permanently on the lookout for new content that may reveal something new about the other, just as we constantly post so people know what we think, what we do, who we are. What we are engaging in is a sort of control – we remain within the facebook box with the need to consume more and more information about other people. The social in social media means constantly consuming and producing content, and in so doing, loses a scene. If we think about the newsfeed on facebook, it is an interminable surface – all we can do is scroll down, and the more we scroll down the more there is, a process that goes on forever. Yet somehow, the desire to maintain such a loss of social scene makes life easier to manage. We live in a society where productivity is often highlighted to be the supreme value of existence, and when this is so, the social becomes easier to manage when it assumes the same characteristics of the productive culture. We feel good when we have produced new content for our profiles, yet here we are not seeking to expend a lot of mental energy by truly trying to connect with another person. True connectedness often takes both a lot of energy and a lot of time. Developing trust, love, solidarity, requires time and patience, which can never be fostered when we are seeking immediate rewards and control of our image. Our social connections follow the logic of

⁸¹ Baudrillard, Jean, and Marie Maclean. "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media." *New Literary History*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1985, pp. 577–589. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/468841), 580.

performativity, where our main concern is to maximize our output (likes, comments, posts) and minimize the input (the energy we expend in the social connections).⁸² Simply put, our social connections become a matter of maintaining the efficiency of the productive society. This is in accord with the claims of autonomist Marxists, who noted how “capital tends to subsume the whole of society into the production process,” so that the “border between working and spare time becomes increasingly blurred.”⁸³ There is always a message we have to respond to, a comment we have to reply to, a picture that could be liked – the lines between the social and work are continually blurred. What is even more interesting is that we hold each other accountable for doing the work on the social media platforms, and if a person doesn’t respond to a message, we are likely to resent them for not doing their work.

If we relate the Baudrillard passage with an analysis of social media platforms, what we notice is that social media alters our perceptions about space, particularly the way in which we perceive the social to be something spatial. This once again makes us fall back into the distinction between “connectivity” and “connectedness.” While connectivity is a term we associate with “technologically mediated connection,” connectedness is more tied with forming “communion” with others, having bodily presence with “family members, neighbors, coworkers, and friends.”⁸⁴ In “Absent to those Present: The Conflict Between Connectivity and Communion,” Chad Engelland brings attention to the fact that connectivity makes us capable of going beyond the limits of our bodily presence. At every moment in time, we have the capacity to go on social media platforms and see what other people are doing in separate places. We have

⁸² Lyotard, Jean François. *The Postmodern Condition : a Report On Knowledge*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 44.

⁸³ Allmer, *Critical Theory and Social Media : Between Emancipation and Commodification*, 172.

⁸⁴ Scalabrino, *Social Epistemology and Technology: Toward Public Self-Awareness regarding Technological Mediation*, 167.

the capacity to witness different places from one point in space, and we can “establish virtual presence to a multitude of absent people.”⁸⁵ The fact that technology has changed to the point of developing portable devices that we can carry along everywhere we go makes this reality even more accentuated.

It is true that though we live in a world that constrains our bodies within a certain perimeter in space, we constantly have the option to pull up our phones (which are now devices that have multiple functions that go beyond mere communication) and enter a different environment of the social media space using our sight. And even then, this sort of activity will never be the same as when the social truly comes alive in a scene – when we can face the other and witness their full presence. In the encounter, individuals are able to open up to each other to the spontaneous, to vulnerability, to lack of control. In the social media space however, everything is controlled because everything that happens in that realm is the product of a decision – to post or not to post. This reduces the social to something that is *easy* to navigate, for social media “always provides us with something productive, stimulating, and easy to do: read our feeds and occasionally make comments.”⁸⁶ It is perhaps this smoothness with which we can partake in something “social” which makes us so drawn to maintain activity in the social networks. This blinds us from what cannot take place through such easy interactions. It blinds us from the necessary complexity that occurs when we physically encounter the other and the attention this requires. Because we become accustomed to the behavior of “connectivity,” connectivity also permeates into physical encounters, encounters which are reinforced by control. Though we use platforms believing we are *connecting* with others, perhaps we should

⁸⁵ Scalabrino, *Social Epistemology and Technology: Toward Public Self-Awareness regarding Technological Mediation*, 165.

⁸⁶ Scalabrino, *Social Epistemology and Technology: Toward Public Self-Awareness regarding Technological Mediation*, 172.

consider how we are only be putting ourselves forward for examination by ourselves and by others. In fact, our online activities may be a form of discipline, for we are opening ourselves to “being constantly seen,” making ourselves a “describable, analyzable object” through our profiles, and allowing ourselves to “be looked at, observed, described in detail, followed from day to day...”⁸⁷ facebook tells us that they listen to the demands of users, but how free are we to craft the space of online sociality according to a new vision? As it stands, we let facebook “define the norms for online sociality,” and thus we “build a world powered by facebook.”⁸⁸

There is also a way in which interactions in the social media space make us less prone to reflect upon ourselves, and so we become less aware about how we are grounded in our relations with other people. We become less aware of what an encounter with the Other means if we do not even question what characterizes our relationship with ourselves. Engelland ends his discussion on connectivity vs. communion by saying that only communion (which is again, characterized by presence and thoughtfulness) has the capacity to satisfy us fully. I agree, but only to the extent in which our physical presence with the Other is backed by a more complex understanding of what the social is – a new sensibility. Mere bodily presence with the Other is not enough to truly foster community, especially when we consider that social relationships may already be “sublimated” by the behaviors that take place in social media platforms. To truly foster communion we must desublimite our social relationships, which can be done by changing the aesthetics of the social media spaces. To say that we must merely fast from devices when we are with other people does not go far enough. Not only does this avoid providing a concrete structural and conscious alternative to the problem, but it also places the responsibility completely on the individual who must make the effort to retreat from the use of a mobile device.

⁸⁷ Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 199-205.

⁸⁸ Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: a Critical History of Social Media*, 67.

It also resorts to a romanticism that is unappealing to many. Instead, we should look to see how we may use technology to foster communion and we must not abide by an either/or mentality (either connectivity without communion or communion without connectivity).

Finally, social media platforms promote wasteful social behavior and make us less mindful about both the state we are living in and the overall state of the world. What they mainly promote are “competitive performances and standardized fun, all the symbols of status, prestige, power, of advertised virility and charm, of commercialized beauty,” which in fact further constrain the possibility to envision alternatives.⁸⁹ A former facebook executive noted how we “curate our lives around a perceived sense of perfection because we get rewarded in these short term signals...and we conflate it with value and we conflate it with truth.”⁹⁰ Most of what generates wasteful behavior is our incapacity to foster long-term thinking in social media spaces and our infatuation with the short term signals we receive from online activity. The content we posted yesterday can be revisited, but even after an hour has passed since our last post, we cannot help but get a feeling that what we have just posted becomes obsolete the moment it is no longer liked, so we must produce even more content. Everything has to come in the instant – the thought, the opinion, the content – our newsfeeds must constantly be refreshed with the novel lest we become bored and insignificant. Social media platforms feed into an addictive insatiability, and it is no wonder that it makes most of its profits by running ads. It follows the same logic as the news channels, the obsession with always being up to date because otherwise news become obsolete. The things we post actualize the same built-in obsolescence as the

⁸⁹ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 17.

⁹⁰ Vincent, James. “Former Facebook Exec Says Social Media Is Ripping Apart Society.” *The Verge*, The Verge, 11 Dec. 2017, www.theverge.com/2017/12/11/16761016/former-facebook-exec-ripping-apart-society.

products we use to be able to post – as soon as we post, the post becomes irrelevant and we must look for other content to produce.

All the images, media, and especially advertisements that circulate within social media platforms are a testament to the fact that social media platforms serve as machines of cultural production. In the documentary, *Consumerism and the Limits to Imagination* by Justin Lewis, it is clear how collectively, advertisements are deeply political, and this cultural production makes it extremely difficult to develop new ways of thinking and of organizing ourselves. At first, the advertisement model was a way for tech companies to provide services to people for free while still being able to make profits, but as Jaron Lanier, a VR pioneer in Silicon Valley, noted, advertising is now synonymous with “behavior modification,” so much so that he no longer wishes to call them social networks, but rather “behavior modification empires.”⁹¹ This should come to no surprise however, for advertising “manipulates humans’ needs, as Marcuse puts it, and advances media concentration.”⁹²

Going back to the subject of waste and its relation to social media platforms, how can the platforms ever purport to bring the world closer together and create a healthier human world if the platforms we use to “connect” with also generate enormous amounts of wealth by prompting us to buy more and more? This is one way in which, though we may be officially connecting in the platforms by exchanging content, we are becoming disconnected from the material and objective world in which we live in. We facilitate the quickness of ordering materials online and avoid thinking about the waste that is produced through consumption and the impact this has on the planet. An environmental consciousness gives us all the more reason to question and change current social media platforms. Are we consuming and producing media that helps us create a

⁹¹ Lanier, “How we need to remake the internet.”

⁹² Boikos, “The Real of the Virtual: Critical Reflections on Web 2.0,” 408.

sustainable world and culture, or are we merely looking the other way, pretending that social media platforms are isolated from other phenomena we witness around the world?

IV. Accounts of Alternative Social Media

“A free society presupposes, not only free institutions and new relationships of production, not only a break with the dominant rationality that has built these institutions and relations, but also with the *basic experience* with the world, a break with the familiar *self-certainty* we have acquired, a break with the manipulated needs and satisfaction to which we have become accustomed. And this break, this emergence of a new type of human being, must take place *prior to* the construction of a new society, because otherwise the chances are that the old Adam is reproduced and that human beings carry over their own repression and their own aggressiveness into the new society.” – “The New Sensibility” Herbert Marcuse

The way “alternative social media” is defined by the Oxford *A Dictionary of Social Media* is that it is a “term used by critics of mainstream social networking sites” to refer to new platforms that have different priorities, such as “being more transparent to users and more under their control... open source, more decentralized, federated, untied to venture capital” and “being less open to corporate and government surveillance and the invasion of privacy...”⁹³ This definition of the alternative largely grounds itself on some of the major problems of social media networks – transparency, user control, surveillance, and privacy. Most criticism of social media platforms focuses on such issues, but the alternatives they provide end up being uninspiring, primarily because they only suggest changing the structure of these platforms to minor degrees and do not suggest changes for the type of culture they actualize. This is not to say that these issues are not important and that they shouldn’t require our attention, but the constant reminder that our privacy is being breached, that we are open to be surveilled through our social media use, and that we don’t entirely have control over our profiles isn’t fully conducive to imagining alternatives. As Thomas Allmer shows in *Critical Theory and Social Media*, in a study where he asked subjects what they perceived was the greatest threats of social media platforms, the

⁹³ Chandler, Daniel, and Rod Munday. "alternative social media." *A Dictionary of Social Media*. : Oxford University Press. [Oxford Reference](#). 2016. Date Accessed 27 Apr. 2018
<<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191803093.001.0001/acref-9780191803093-e-45>>.

majority answered that the main threats were “economic, political, or cultural surveillance as a result of data abuse, data forwarding, or a lack of data protection,” that it is problematic that they lack “privacy and privacy control,” and that there is a danger that information could be accessed by potential employers.⁹⁴ None of these perceived threats take into account the effects social media platforms have on our social relationships.

One of the main points of structural alternatives is that the architecture of social media must be changed in order to allow for liberated forms. Platforms are currently molded after a client-server network architecture which is a “hierarchical and centralized architecture of a powerful server with data and files in the center and relatively powerless clients at the edge.”⁹⁵ The servers (politically and economically powerful corporations like facebook) are computer systems that offer their resources to clients, while clients are the ones who contact the servers in order to make use of their resources. Not only do clients rely on servers for the use of resources, but they also generate wealth for the servers by allowing their personal data to be sold to advertisers. When put in these terms, it is easier to see how we are completely at the service of social media platforms when we want to contact people we care about. Our time *is* money – not for ourselves, but for platforms like facebook. An alternative is to further promote peer-to-peer systems, which is a decentralized and non-hierarchical network architecture where “each computer can act as a client or server for other computers” for the sharing of “digital contents such as audio, video, and data files.”⁹⁶ In such a system, people are both consumers and producers of resources, and they do not rely on a central power to access these resources. In order to not rely on a centralized data center, users could carry their own mobile web server and

⁹⁴ Allmer, *Critical Theory and Social Media : Between Emancipation and Commodification*, 138-139.

⁹⁵ Allmer, *Critical Theory and Social Media : Between Emancipation and Commodification*, 151.

⁹⁶ Allmer, *Critical Theory and Social Media : Between Emancipation and Commodification*, 153.

everyone “would be the owner of his or her server and could control what to share online,” instead of having no awareness whatsoever of where their data is being stored.⁹⁷ Though this addresses one of the endless possibilities in the restructuring of social media technology, it does not address how our consciousness must be altered in order to make proper use of these technologies. We must be reminded that the initial spirit of community and imagination that had started the internet has now turned into a scenario where we have become fully reliant on social media services to communicate with others. If we do not have a richer understanding of what the social is in relation with our consciousness, we will most likely repeat the same errors and become fully trapped in the box of social media uncreativity.

When thinking about alternatives, critical theorists often mention that it is not possible for contradictions in the structure of the internet to be resolved until we overcome a capitalist structure of society that perpetuates inequalities. As Christian Fuchs writes, “an alternative Internet requires, together with alternative design principles, an *alternative social setting*: a solidary, co-operative information society – a participatory democracy.”⁹⁸ This is true in that the internet does not exist in isolation from the broader structures of society. The only major social networks that can survive are those that make profits from advertisements and function out of the “exploitation of digital labor on the Internet.”⁹⁹ Non-profit media have a difficult time surviving if they do not turn to donations, which are often “unstable,” and if they do not operate with the “help of precarious voluntary labor.”¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, it is difficult to picture radical alternatives when there is only mention of the need to establish a “participatory democracy” in order to have a non-repressive and non-exploitative form of the internet. Though Fuchs makes clear that

⁹⁷ Allmer, *Critical Theory and Social Media : Between Emancipation and Commodification*, 153.

⁹⁸ Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 265.

⁹⁹ Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 265.

¹⁰⁰ Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 264.

“collaboration and co-operation are the fundamental meanings of the terms ‘social’ and ‘society,’” and e highlights the structural changes that could lead to such a society, he does not describe what sort of individual would use these new platforms. Certainly, the structural plays into social change, but if there is no discussion on what people should value in the social, nor how they could transform their sensibilities, there is little reason to believe that mere alteration of the structure of the internet would lead to a radical practice of it. True social transformation can only come when “individuals...transform their present needs, sensibility, consciousness, values, and behavior.”¹⁰¹ If we don’t question our current needs and the way we are seeing the world, we end up actualizing even more repressive forms of the internet, even if new platforms have a participatory or commons-based nature.

Proponents of alternative media often state that if media becomes more participatory, if the division between producers of content and consumers of content is broken, then this could “challenge the concentration of symbolic power, empower ordinary people by giving them a voice, and assist them in living a self-determined life.”¹⁰² Despite the fact that making media more participatory could empower people, Sandoval and Fuchs point out in *Towards a Critical Theory of Alternative Media* that this vision has three main problems: participatory media can fragment the public sphere (for it can split the sphere into exclusive groups that do not gain wider visibility), participatory principles could be subsumed under dominating principles (as has occurred with social media platforms in the development of web 2.0), and participatory models fail to see how non-participatory forms could serve liberating functions.¹⁰³ Sandoval and Fuchs

¹⁰¹ McMahon, "Aesthetics, Technology, and Democracy: An Analysis of Marcuse's Concept of the New Sensibility," 146.

¹⁰² Sandoval, Marisol, and Christian Fuchs. *Towards a Critical Theory of Alternative Media*. 27 Vol., 2010. Web), 143.

¹⁰³ Sandoval, *Towards a Critical Theory of Alternative Media*, 143 – 145.

also present a convincing ideal of alternative media through an examination of the “dialectical relationship between media actors (producers and recipients) and media structures (economic product form, media content, media technologies, media institutions, etc).”¹⁰⁴ The differences between the “capitalist mass media system” and the “ideal alternative media system” are depicted in the figure below which I have adapted from Sandoval and Fuch’s article:

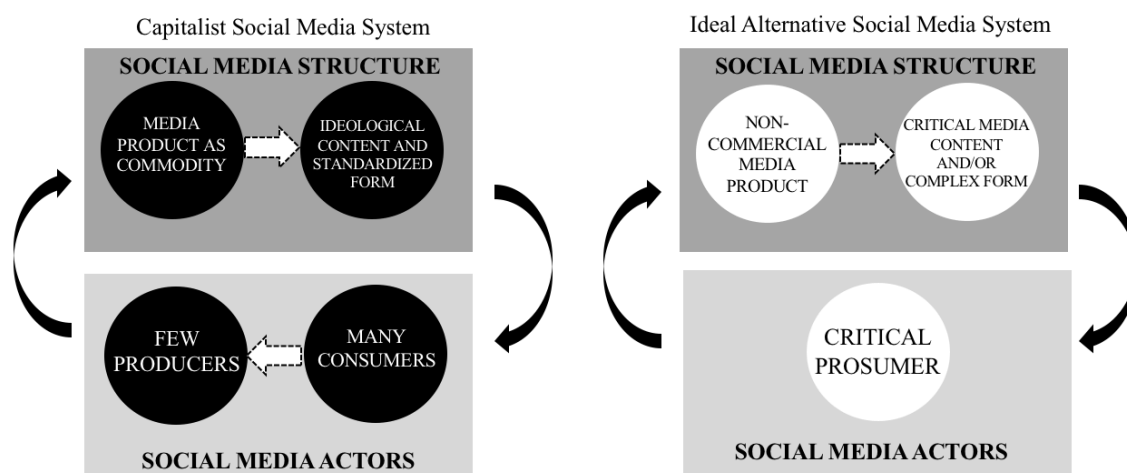


Fig. 1. A model of capitalist social media vs. an ideal model of alternative social media.

In relation to this alternative model, we could say that the priorities for an alternative form of social media platforms are a structure that fosters non-commercial media and also creates complex content that is not just purely “ideological content in standardized form.”¹⁰⁵ At the actor level, the transformation alternative social media systems would bring would be that actors would be both producers and consumers, and that actors would also be able to “critically interpret existing media content” and “produce new critical media content.”¹⁰⁶ Though I agree with both of these claims, the way that “critical media content” is described remains vague and at

¹⁰⁴ Sandoval, *Towards a Critical Theory of Alternative Media*, 145.

¹⁰⁵ Sandoval, *Towards a Critical Theory of Alternative Media*, 145.

¹⁰⁶ Sandoval, *Towards a Critical Theory of Alternative Media*, 145.

the level of discourse that does not negate that of capitalist mass media. To put it simply, these visions of alternatives lack a *positive* character to them. What is needed to truly counter the way we perceive media is an account of a positive way of experiencing and sensing the world, which essentially comes to an alternative vision of what the social can be. Though multiple critics question what Herbert Marcuse may have meant when he placed a focus on aesthetics and developing a new sensibility, and how this relates to the practical use of technology, Marcuse's account of the new sensibility provides the alternative values that are needed to counteract the powerlessness we feel when we try to imagine a different social media platform space.

V. Developing a New Sensibility

Critical theory alternatives for social media focus on the need for changes in the structures of social media platforms, yet they do not articulate what the *aesthetics* of a different social media platform would be like. Much has been said on how the current capitalist economic structure leads to exploitative forms of social media platforms, and though there is certainly a connection between the two, little has been said on how alternatives to social media platforms could lead to new ways of thinking, seeing, and *living*. Just as there is already literature that speaks about the need for alternative critical media, there is an urgent necessity to talk specifically about alternative *social media* in a way that is focused on the culture that is being created in the internet space. In *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse makes it clear that the “critical analysis of this society calls for new categories: moral, political, *aesthetic*.”¹⁰⁷ What often goes unexamined is the last of these three – the aesthetic dimension of our social existence – which has a profound influence on our collective state of consciousness and our common use of technology. Having examined regressive aspects of social media, which included spatial and

¹⁰⁷ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 7.

temporal considerations, we can see how they represent a repressed actualization of the social.

Through negation, we can imagine how we could change the aesthetics of the social media space so that they may lead us on the road toward greater freedom. This may also allow us to *feel* a genuine *need* to change them. The aesthetic, which originally meant “pertaining to the senses,”¹⁰⁸ is of extreme importance, for it is:

“the *Lebenswelt* [Lifeworld] on which the *needs* and faculties of freedom depend for their *liberation*. They cannot develop in an environment shaped by and for aggressive impulses, nor can they be envisaged as the mere effect of a new set of social institutions. They can emerge only in the collective *practice of creating an environment*: level by level, step by step – in the material and intellectual production, an environment in which the *nonaggressive, erotic, receptive faculties of man, in harmony with the consciousness of freedom*, strive for the pacification of man and nature.”¹⁰⁹

Decentralizing platforms would only solve one form of domination, but the elements which are of most importance today are those that can build a *whole* new internet environment, a whole new way of *imagining* the social, a revolution of consciousness and perception that can start from the witnessing of the extraordinary in the internet and can lead us to a more united and hopeful vision of the world. This is the area where the most impact can be generated, for many are looking to be uplifted, to be brought out of the repetitiveness and dullness of the current social media environment. Marcuse says explicitly that developing a new set of social institutions, and in this case social platforms, will not lead to a more liberated society if this endeavor is not accompanied by an effort to actualize a new *form* of the social, one that fosters the nonaggressive and erotic desires of mankind and moves away from the aggressive and repressive. The internet space, and particularly social media platforms, can be one of the places to create a collective environment that embodies a new aesthetics of the social. As mediums where people can connect with each other across major distances every day, they already

¹⁰⁸ Marcuse, Herbert. “The New Sensibility.” 1970. Lecture. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBWiiFtqq84>

¹⁰⁹ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 31.

actualize one form of collective consciousness. As Marcuse notes in *Eros and Civilization*, the aesthetic dimension is “the medium in which the senses and the intellect meet,” creating a bridge between the senses and reason, showing how the senses have an “active, constitutive role” in transforming “reason...in shaping the categories under which the world is ordered, experienced, changed.”¹¹⁰ This is so that sensibility may have “a *productive* role in the creation of social relationships.”¹¹¹ Reason therefore, would be freed from the rationality of “acquisition, competition, and exploitation.”¹¹² New ways of sensing and experiencing come along with new ways of being, which in turn directly affect how we relate to others.

When we invoke the “aesthetic,” we seem to drift away from the control and predictability of the empirical, but this is precisely the point – to find room for potentiality within the existing societal frameworks that we have. This aligns with the goals of critical theory that were previously mentioned – to address precisely what is possible after fully considering the present material circumstances.¹¹³ When speaking of aesthetics with relation to social media platforms, the task at hand becomes complicated, for it can be easy to fall into a space of abstraction and vagueness, where a new form of the social seems to be esoteric rather than practicable by many. However, the divide between the aesthetic and the practical is already blurred. We are already being affected by one from of practical aesthetics in the social media sphere – one that presents breaking news, convictions that battle against each other and split society into different sectors guarded by the walls of opinion, attention-grabbing videos and

¹¹⁰ Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization: a Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 179; McMahon, "Aesthetics, Technology, and Democracy: An Analysis of Marcuse's Concept of the New Sensibility," 147.

¹¹¹ McMahon, "Aesthetics, Technology, and Democracy: An Analysis of Marcuse's Concept of the New Sensibility," 147.

¹¹² Marcuse, “The New Sensibility.”

¹¹³ Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*, 34.

images, all within the anesthetizing, blue-framed, ad-filled facebook box. This is the what we are feeding our senses with, which directly affects our experience of the world.

Let us imagine the creative potentials that can be envisioned once we break with the matter-of-factness with which current platforms present themselves. Let us imagine the consciousness that would emerge if we used these tools to actualize a society that values the individuality of each person, while remaining conscious of a certain Oneness that connects us all. Let us imagine a society that is able to *move* us in our interactions. Social media platforms, if altered, have a potential to be a space where the separations and boundaries between the practical and the sensible may dissipate, and where a radical “pure and unconditional hospitality” could be strived for, where we open ourselves to “someone who is neither expected nor invited, to whomever arrives as an absolutely foreign *visitor*, as a new *arrival*, nonidentifiable and unforeseeable, in short, wholly other.”¹¹⁴ Instead, we still like to remain within notions of the *private*, within a confined circle of “friends.” If we wish to add someone to our circle, we must make a deliberate decision to *add*, which removes any sense of being able to open ourselves fully to an encounter with the Other. In order for the Other to interact with us online, we must first let them into the gates of our profile. What if these gates were taken down? Would we then allow ourselves to be consumed by fear of the Other, would we still then strongly advocate for privacy?

We may name the exploitative and aggressive way of seeing which is constantly circulating in social media as a “mutilated sensibility,” for it closes itself off to other forms of experiencing the world, those that are not grounded on terror, violence, and distraction. What occurs when we become receptive to new forms and break with the old ones is a disassociation

¹¹⁴ Habermas, Jürgen, Jacques Derrida, and Giovanna Borradori. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror : Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 128.

from the current order of things. This allows our imaginations to take flights, yet we must remain conscious of our present technological capacities, to see new ways in which we could use the internet space. But where must we break with the familiar? The “roots of social relationships where individuals most directly and profoundly experience their world and themselves” is “in their sensibility, in their instinctual needs.”¹¹⁵ Thus we must look to radically reshape our sensibility, and once we are receptive to change, we can develop a *new sensibility*.

The new sensibility begins with the Great Refusal – “the protest against that which is” – the refusal to constrain our senses within the present social media platforms.¹¹⁶ But this goes above and beyond merely refusing a social media platform. In this refusal, there is a deeper demand for a “radical change in consciousness,” which allows for the emergence of a “*new Subject*” who changes the social existence, an agent of radical social change.¹¹⁷ A collective of new subjects would consist of “men and women who have the good conscience of being human, tender, sensuous, who are no longer ashamed of themselves,” for one of the marks of freedom is to be no longer ashamed of oneself.¹¹⁸ Freedom from shame means freedom from terror and from systems of our own internalized domination. It is a feeling of freedom that yearns to truly connect with the Other, a deep feeling that springs from our instincts and makes us understand the Other. The new sensibility, as Marcuse puts it, is synonymous with the “demands of the life instincts.”¹¹⁹ Such demands “resist and deny the massive exploitative power of corporate capitalism even in its most comfortable and liberal realizations” in favor of new goals and values.¹²⁰ Social media platforms today promote a mutilated sensibility which can progressively

¹¹⁵ McMahon, "Aesthetics, Technology, and Democracy: An Analysis of Marcuse's Concept of the New Sensibility," 144

¹¹⁶ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 64.

¹¹⁷ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 53.

¹¹⁸ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 21.

¹¹⁹ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 19.

¹²⁰ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, vii.

be negated. We consume enormous amounts of information which shapes how we sense, even though we may not be aware of it. When our senses remain within the bounds of certain images and significations, we close the horizons of our imagination. Unless we change our “ingrown patterns” of behavior, “social change will remain ‘incomplete,’ even self-defeating.”¹²¹ Without changing our behavior and our way of existing, which goes beyond questions of structure, we run the danger of creating new internet structures that replicate the dominating characteristics of those of the past.

The new sensibility model is one that breaks away from the usual “philosophical devaluation of the senses as passive, merely receptive.”¹²² It takes into consideration that our “senses are shaped and molded by society” and that they can have a profound effect on our imagination and our reason.¹²³ Again, we must only think about how the images, videos, and posts we consume on social media platforms daily directly affect what we sense, what we are attune to in reality. We rise every day to our devices that give us access to these portals and hold them up like mirrors to ask them what our reality is.

Through the break with our usual ways of seeing, the new sensibility is a *praxis*, a practice which affirms “the right to *build* a society in which the abolition of poverty and toil terminates in a universe where the *sensuous, the playful, the calm, and the beautiful* become forms of existence and thereby the *Form* of the society itself.”¹²⁴ The emphasis lies on the real capacity to *build* these forms, without allowing them to remain in a space of non-actualization and mere contemplation. Through such a practice, and perhaps through practice in multiple areas

¹²¹ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 11.

¹²² Kellner, Douglas. “Marcuse and the Quest for Radical Subjectivity.” (*Counterpoints*, vol. 168, 2003, pp. 67–83. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/42977493), 76.

¹²³ Kellner, “Marcuse and the Quest for Radical Subjectivity,” 76.

¹²⁴ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 25.

of social existence, we are able to create a total new *form* of society. Yet what exactly do we mean by form? As Marcuse makes clear, form is:

“...the achievement of the artistic perception which breaks the unconscious and ‘false’ ‘automatism,’ the unquestioned familiarity which operates in every practice, including the revolutionary practice – an automatism of immediate experience, but a socially engineered experience which militates against the liberation of sensibility.”¹²⁵

Our use of social media platforms follows this same “unquestioned familiarity” – we have become accustomed to use them as our primary communication tools. Our dependence upon these tools has increased to the extent that we may not be able to see ourselves in a world without them. We organize events and protests through them, call our friends, message them, post pictures and videos, sell things, follow news stories, etc... They are not something we just pick up when we need to use them and let go when we don’t – we somehow have to constantly participate in the social media platform sphere lest we disappear from the world. They have an immense power over what we are conscious of, and in the world of apps, they are not even just confined to communication. Social media platforms like facebook store the data from other applications we use, and we might say that a copy of a certain part of our selves lives in the internet space. We can no longer say that we are fully independent from these platforms – we constantly rely on them to go about our everyday life, so much so that they engineer our experience of the social. Their structure is also highly predictable, and though the content of the posts varies, platforms like facebook are dull, and at best, “cute and pathetic.”¹²⁶ We need to develop a new sensibility to break from the automatism of social media platforms as they are, but we also need to form new platforms that foster this sensibility and allow it to flourish. We could say that social media platforms do have the potential to become sites of “human self-realization,”

¹²⁵ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 39.

¹²⁶ Lovink, *Social Media Abyss: Critical Internet Cultures and the Force of Negation*, 41.

but how often do we think of them in this way?¹²⁷ What is even more disturbing is that barely any discussion takes place in the public sphere about taking power into our own hands and trying to change the tools we use for our communication. There is again, a strange perception that this is how things must be because this is how the tools have been provided to us – it is as if we have accepted our powerlessness when it comes to creating new ways of communicating through the internet social media space.

The new sensibility is also connected to values of the essence of the social. The reason why it is a valuable concept to use for critique of social media platforms, is that it provides the language that allows us to think about alternative social values to actualize in the internet sphere. It is also what is necessary to challenge the logic of pure connection in the web, which reduces “an increasing number of elements to a format, a standard, and a code that makes compatible different elements,” and thus represses sensibility for the sake of promoting “punctual and repeatable interaction of algorithmic functions...”¹²⁸ In sum, the new sensibility pushes for:

“the need for meaningful work, gratification, and community...it affirms *love* and the preservation of the environment....it asserts the need for *beauty*, *sensuousness*, and *play*, affirming the aesthetic and erotic components of experience.”¹²⁹

Adopting a new sensibility means taking on a “total refusal of the dominant societal needs, values, and institutions,” which represents “a radical break with the entirety of society’s institutions, culture, and lifestyle, and supplies prefigurations of a new culture and society.”¹³⁰ It is an overall alternative way of *experiencing* and not just thinking, for the whole purpose of developing a new sensibility is that it reshapes existing instincts and needs so that one can

¹²⁷ Allmer, *Critical Theory and Social Media : Between Emancipation and Commodification*, 185.

¹²⁸ Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, 125

¹²⁹ Kellner, “Marcuse and the Quest for Radical Subjectivity,” 76.

¹³⁰ Kellner, “Marcuse and the Quest for Radical Subjectivity,” 76.

experience new things “outside of the context of violence and exploitation.”¹³¹ Developing a new sensibility is not only about its relation to aesthetics – it is also about embarking upon “radical democratic processes that question what, in fact, true needs are.”¹³² This connects us to the original goal – to question our need for social media platforms in order to find forgotten liberating potentials, and ultimately we find this has to do with developing a new sensibility that is tied to human values of democratization. Living a new sensibility means directing instinct toward an ethic of cooperation which is grounded in solidarity with others.¹³³ It is not only about living new values of what the social can be, but also creating a relationship with the technology we have at our disposal, so that there is a link between sensibility and practice. The new sensibility is not a call for the “arrest or reduction of technical progress,” but one for “the elimination of...features” in technology “which perpetuate man’s subjection to the apparatus and the intensification of the struggle for existence...”¹³⁴ It espouses technology in a way that alleviates and protects life, frees “human energy and time,” and does away with “spurious and parasitarian ‘personalized’ services,” – overall, it offers freedom from the “rule of merchandise over man.”¹³⁵

A space where the technical already comes together with the sensible is the space of the social media platform. There is an enormous unperceivable *web* being formed in the background of our interactions with other people through the internet – we essentially feed in information to this web every day, and it essentially feeds back information to us. We reap what we sow in the intimate dance between the social and the technological. As the world is suddenly becoming

¹³¹ Wilkerson, William S, and Jeffrey Paris. *New Critical Theory: Essays On Liberation*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 10 ; Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 25.

¹³² McMahon "Aesthetics, Technology, and Democracy: An Analysis of Marcuse's Concept of the New Sensibility," 141

¹³³ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 91.

¹³⁴ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 90.

¹³⁵ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 91.

more and more aware of an issue we do not yet comprehend fully as a society, social media platforms and the interactions they foster have a profound effect on democratic institutions, on the way people behave with others, and on the way they see themselves. As one former facebook executive said himself, they “created tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works...”¹³⁶ As he recognized, the web that grows every day with the information we put into it through our activity is like a beast. If “you feed the beast that beast will destroy you. If you push back on it, we have a chance to control it and reign it...people need a *hard break* from these tools.”¹³⁷ If this message comes from one of the contributors who shaped social media platforms, then there is obviously something terribly wrong. The beast we are feeding through the web is precisely the mutilated sensibility that affects the way we experience life. The way we experience life is directly affected by the images of life that we consume. Images, most importantly, affect how we *imagine*. If how we imagine is caught in a mutilated sensibility, then we will always remain within the redundant expression of impossibility. Why not actualize a new sensibility?

What critical social media theories are missing is a greater liberty to play with ideas for what an alternative social media sphere would look like. To envision new ideas, we should take on the attitude of a ‘bricoleur,’ someone whose “way of thinking and working” lies somewhere in between the “concrete and abstract,” and whose actions produce works from a set of disparate elements.¹³⁸ As Vito Campanelli states in *Web Aesthetics: How Digital Media Affect Culture and Society*, the main characteristic feature of the ‘bricoleur’ is “the rearrangement of pre-existing elements, the leftovers of other works, rather than attempting to create something from

¹³⁶ “Former Facebook Exec Says Social Media Is Ripping Apart Society.”

¹³⁷ “Former Facebook Exec Says Social Media Is Ripping Apart Society.”

¹³⁸ Campanelli, Vito. *Web Aesthetics : How Digital Media Affect Culture and Society*. (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers , 2010), 204.

nothing.”¹³⁹ Like the ‘bricoleur,’ critical theorists should aim towards examining what works and what doesn’t for different social media platforms, and work with these elements to form hybrids that take into consideration both the abstract essence of what the social is and the concrete forms that could actualize such an essence using technological tools at our disposal.

In my curiosity to explore new possibilities, I came across a virtual reality platform named “high fidelity.” What drew my attention to this platform is that they draw together a “resonant group of conspirators, united by a shared conviction that it’s time to get busy and build the rich virtual worlds and experiences promised by fiction for decades.”¹⁴⁰ This message seemed to resonate with the call Marcuse makes to build a new environment step by step, to create a space where technical reason is coupled with sensibility to make way for a new way of seeing. Thus, I downloaded the platform, and entered the virtual reality realm through the screen of my computer. I found that barely any users were using this platform at the time I ventured there but found one realm among many that had two participants in it. When my avatar appeared in the space, I found that the background of the realm was two-dimensional, while objects inside it were three dimensional – there was a variation of colors and shapes, and the experience was deeply disorienting. I could hear conversation in the background, and as I moved in a certain direction toward the voices, I finally saw that there were two avatars talking to each other. I walked up to these avatars, and they took notice of me. One of them immediately said “Hello?” and I was taken aback by the fact that there may have been a person on the other end controlling the avatar.

¹³⁹ Campanelli, Vito. *Web Aesthetics : How Digital Media Affect Culture and Society*.

¹⁴⁰ “WHO WE ARE.” *High Fidelity*, highfidelity.com/team_1.

My senses did not immediately know what to make of this, but they eventually became accustomed to this experience. I answered back through the microphone on my headset and asked them if they were artificial intelligence or if they were real people, precisely because it was the first time I had had the experience of encountering another person in a virtual realm through direct voice interaction, without first having a request to connect with them. That's perhaps what was most exceptional – a direct encounter without barriers. One of them spoke in a robotic voice answering that they were indeed an AI system, and then there was laughter. However, I still could not believe that they could in fact be real people who gathered in this space to converse, a space that they themselves had built. By continuing the conversation with these two avatars, I later discovered that they were indeed two real people – one of them was a psychiatrist and the other a programmer for virtual reality realms. The programmer was helping the psychiatrist create a realm where patients could potential gather with her, and she mentioned that she had made the backgrounds of the space purposely two-dimensional so that her patients would not feel drawn to stay within the virtual reality structure.

That is another component which I found to be astounding – the degree of creativity that virtual reality spaces could permit. They are able to transcend the need for boxes in posts, and they seem to emphasize the notion of *play* which is missing from social media platforms. In that first encounter with the two avatars, I was informed that a group of programmers gathered together in one of the realms, or domains, at a certain time to discuss how to craft different realms. I joined in on one of these meetings, for it was open to anyone who had downloaded the high fidelity platform. Though I have no experience with programming myself and I hardly understood what most of the people gathering there were saying, what was immediately noticeable was the creative environment that was being fostered. They were all helping each

other with how to 3-D model particular objects, and the realm they were all meeting in had been a cooperative creation. One of the people there also explained to me that the high fidelity platform allows each user to have their own server, so even if the company crashes, people still have access to the domains they have created and they can share them with others to connect in those spaces. I found this to be of incredible potential, for I can imagine people having ownership over their own domains, and in the future. If they have knowledge of modeling and programming, which most people should if they are to have full ownership over their internet activity, then they could craft their own domains according to their own senses, desires, visions, imaginations, and make it a space where people could encounter each other. And this was essentially what the internet space was imagined to be – a space where one did not feel tied completely to one’s sense of “self,” but felt endless possibilities open up in a space that was different from the experience of the day-to-day world.

Though there is always the danger that people will get absorbed to virtual reality realms, they ultimately could provide a better alternative to social media platforms which *already do* absorb their users through the content on those platforms. Because 3-D modeling in virtual realms allows people to actualize the ideas they imagine without needing actual materials to see bring them into being, and they allow people to navigate spaces and environments that they themselves have created, virtual reality realms open the potential to imagine and think within a space that is detached from reality, and thus perhaps makes it easier to conceive of alternatives. Such realms would only serve to liberate society if people always have a conscious goal of connecting the experience they have in the virtual realm with the experience they have of reality, and not see the two as separate. Virtual reality realms have the potential to be productive spaces where people build a new sensibility through the images they actualize in these realms, and

where people feel a greater freedom to play with forms, colors, shapes, and build alternative spaces that could challenge the necessarily rigid structure of present-day society. The virtual reality realm could be an encounter with “estranging language and images which make perceptible, visible, and audible that which is no longer, or not yet, perceived, said, and heard in everyday life,”¹⁴¹ serving a similar function as art does in the realm of politics. I also see them as a space where people can not only communicate with others in a way that is not limited by distance, but also in a way where they do not feel the need to consume constant news information, feel the need to constantly self-promote and permeate their whole lives with connection. Connection could have a set time and place in the virtual realm, which would give even a greater freedom to other hours of the day in reality. Hosting group meetings in virtual reality for a more limited time would give greater value to what is said, and also go beyond the limits of the text, of the hyper-reality which we feed into our lives. It is also a way through which we may not completely discard of the technical while keeping some degree of online sociality.

V. Conclusion

Online sociality through social media platforms permeates multiple aspects of our lives. As such, they are welcomed with an uncritical acceptance which makes it difficult to imagine how things could be otherwise.

I was prompted to look further into the critical theory perspective of social media platforms after noticing how everything is leveled in the social media space, how we have lost touch with *feeling* what an essence of the social can be, and we have conformed to social connections online which always leave us with “*bland feelings* that blend into the background

¹⁴¹ Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, 72.

like a steam into clouds.”¹⁴² Part of what allows us to break with this conception and perceived need to have the current social media platforms we have is an examination of the critical history of the social media platforms. Through it, we see that the internet space was born out of a spirit for a more communitarian society, a space where people could come together instead of being driven apart. This is a vision we have drastically diverged from.

At an increasing rate, people are slowly becoming aware of how the tools they have deemed to be “necessary” are affecting their lives. Tracing the development of social media platforms, which I only did partially in this essay by paying close attention to how they made connectivity salable, fires our imagination to think about how things may be otherwise, how we can take power into our own hands and figure out a way through which our primary communication tools do not have to be controlled by corporations like facebook. It allows us to see that we are in a circumstance where if we want to get in touch with someone we care about, we have to do it through a platform that constantly feeds us with ads and records data which we have no control over. If we start to juxtapose the way we use social media platforms now with what they could be like if we kept certain values of the social in mind, if we truly sought to create a more creative and collaborative society, then we would see that we are falling short of creating liberating internet spaces.

What current platforms promote, outside of their obvious utility for connection, is an aesthetic that is filled with over-consumption of information, a need to constantly be consumed by opinion, and a need to constantly consume advertisements, images, text, and videos. We develop an insatiability for information which completely overtakes our attention, and we feed ourselves on the short-term pleasure feedback loops that the very nature of facebook posts

¹⁴² Scalabrino, *Social Epistemology and Technology: Toward Public Self-Awareness regarding Technological Mediation*, 83.

promote. By taking into consideration how social media platforms affect our perception of space and time, we see how they affect our overall sensibility. What is surprising is that we do not think twice about how this affects our perception of what is possible.

Marcuse's concept of the new sensibility is a valuable conceptual that helps us develop alternatives and makes us consider what it is we value in the social. The new sensibility focuses on the need to reshape our current needs and sensibility so that we *yearn* for greater freedom and so that we are filled by a new way of experiencing the world – a world that is more tender, more loving, more creative, more collaborative, more beautiful, more uplifting, and leads us on the way to truly integrate with the Other. It is a way of articulating alternatives without having to constantly be constrained in the space of mere structural considerations – the aesthetic, the practical, and the moral have to go hand in hand to lead us towards a brighter future. Aesthetic considerations are largely being neglected in discussions of social media alternatives, perhaps because of their un-scientific and un-measurable character. Though as Marcuse notes, even though the aesthetic dimension *is* fictitious, it is “‘unreal’ not because it is less, but because it is more as well as qualitatively ‘other’ than the established reality.”¹⁴³

The virtual reality experience has a potential to help us grapple with how the space of the social internet could be like. It would allow us to create environments out of our own imagination without having to rely on the control of constant self-presentation on facebook, and without having to remain within the boxes of posts in the sea of news information, videos, games, events, pictures, etc... Precisely because it is detached from what we consider to be real, it gives us greater room to build a new sensibility, so long as we always connect, as theory does,

¹⁴³ Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, 54.

what we learn in this disorienting online environment with the experience of the world outside, and travel between the virtual reality realm and the realm of our day-to-day lives.

When we log into facebook, we are prompted with the question on the status box: “What’s on your mind?” Perhaps we should consider not only what we think rationally and technically through our facebook posts, but how our overall human sensibility connects to the experience of the internet. Perhaps this will lead us in the right direction.

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