



# Digital Technology and the Problem of Dialogical Discourse in Social Media

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I discuss some prominent features of our use of social media and what I think are its harms. My paper has three main parts. In the first part, I use a dialogical framework to argue that much of the discursive activity online is manifested as an ethically impoverished other-directedness and interactivity. In the second part, I identify and discuss several reasons that help explain why so much of the discursive activity on social media is ethically lacking. And in the final part, I mention some of the effects these discursive practices have on us even when offline. Specifically, I suggest that the persistent use of digital communication technologies trains its users to adopt these problematic online discursive attitudes and activities into their experiences offline, making it more difficult for them to engage with themselves and others in more dialogically ethical ways.

**Key words:** digital technology, the internet, the dialogical, social media, discourse

## 1. Introduction

Once we confront the possibility that digital technological developments and uses might not always be good or healthy, it becomes important to diagnose what the potential harms of such developments and uses might be.<sup>1</sup> This has become especially true for social media. While, as Carlos G. Prado observes, “emphasis in published articles on social media and Internet use has focused mainly on privacy issues rather than physical and psychological questions” (2016, 7), there is a growing literature that identifies and discusses what the “negative socio-psychological effects” (2016, 1) might be (see especially Carr 2010; Fairfield 2016; Prado 2016;

Turkle 2011; 2015; et al).<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I discuss some prominent features of our use of social media and what I think are its harms.<sup>3</sup>

My paper has three main parts. In the first part, I argue that while social media has other-directedness and interactivity as two of its central features, much of the discursive activity on social media is manifested as an ethically impoverished other-directedness and interactivity. I will use a framework of dialogicality to illuminate the significance of this other-directedness and interactivity. In the second part, I will identify and discuss several reasons that help explain why so much of the discursive activity on social media is ethically lacking. This is no doubt due, in part, to the fact that, as Nicholas Carr (2010) and others have shown, the Internet as an environment is, largely, a psychologically unhealthy place. But it is also due, as Sherry Turkle (2015) and others have shown, to the specific ways we use digital communication technologies to engage with that environment, which have contributed to what Paul Fairfield calls the decline of “communicative and linguistic competence” (Fairfield in Prado 2016, 110) and to what Turkle laments as the “lost practice in the empathic arts—learning to make eye contact, to listen, and to attend to others” (2015, 7).<sup>4</sup> I will draw on their work to explain additional reasons why so much of the discursive activity on social media is as lamentable as it is. And in the final part of my paper, I will mention some of the effects these discursive practices have on us even when offline.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I will suggest that the persistent use of digital communication technologies, especially social media, trains its users to adopt these problematic online discursive attitudes and activities into their experiences offline, making it more difficult for them to engage with themselves and others in more dialogically ethical ways.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. A Dialogical Framework**

I first want to describe the normative-ethical framework of dialogicality I will use for my discussion of our social media activity and suggest why it is an especially useful heuristic.<sup>7</sup> I have offered a more comprehensive account of dialogicality elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> but for my purposes here, I want to distill that account into its most prominent features. Specifically, dialogicality 1) is descriptive of activity within the realm of human discourse; 2) requires the participation of at least one person, rather than, say, artificial intelligence machines; 3) is inherently unfinalizable or open-ended; 4) entails address or solicitation by another; and 5) because of (4) specifically, it has a normative dimension, such that there are better and worse ways in which one can act (and respond) as an interlocutor.

In this ethical framework, the quality of discursive activity is understood as ranging along a spectrum from the monological to the dialogical, where, with few exceptions, the latter is ethically more desirable than the former. Thus, in actual everyday life, our discursive activity is typically more or less monological or dialogical. And while there are some cases which will be inherently more monological—e.g., court cross-examinations, military orders, and perhaps police interrogations—most cases of human discursive activity inherently avail themselves of the possibility for dialogical action, and, in most cases, the richer, more receptive, attuned, and responsive the discursive engagement, the more dialogical it is. Dialogicality, as a concept, includes but is not reducible to actual dialogue; instead, it includes those features found within the dynamic of dialogue, but it recognizes how such features obtain as well within the broader phenomenon of human discursive activity.

This framework is valuable for two reasons. First, it offers a helpful heuristic for making sense of human other-directedness and interactivity, and therefore can illuminate how our online other-directedness and interactivity are typically impoverished. And second, because it uncovers an underappreciated aspect of why our social media activity is simultaneously so frustrating and yet so alluring—and, of course, even addictive. Namely, it enables us to see that our use of interactive communication technologies is so alluring not because it is typically satisfying but, rather, because it is often *unsatisfying*.<sup>9</sup> That is, we frequently yearn for genuinely dialogical interactions—to really connect with one another—but we typically get only ever-more monological ones.<sup>10</sup> Yet just as in our offline lives, we continue to seek the often-elusive satisfaction of genuinely dialogical engagement.<sup>11</sup>

In *The Shallows*, Carr identifies a central paradox of the Internet's effects on our minds, one "that promises to have the greatest long-term influence over how we think," which is that "the Net seizes our attention only to scatter it" (2010, 118). But there is an additional paradox that emerges when considering the way our Internet and especially social media use affect our social interactions and relationships, one which strikes specifically at the heart of the relation between other-directedness and interactivity on the one hand and dialogicality on the other. Namely, that our online activity is a form of other-directedness and interactivity leads us to believe that it would necessarily be dialogical in nature. However, it frequently is not.

As thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and, building on their work, Charles Taylor<sup>12</sup> and others have shown, we, as human beings, are inherently other-directed. Heidegger describes in *Being and Time* how we find

ourselves “always already” called upon by others. And Levinas describes this phenomenon at a deeper level in his famous description in *Totality and Infinity* (1969) of the solicitous pull we feel in our encounter with the other’s face. As Levinas observes, in our encounter with the other, we are brought to feel the full moral weight of the call to responsibility that the other’s face makes on us. Thus, we are not only directed towards others but also ethically responsible to and for others in a fundamental way. We can never extricate ourselves from this call or pull. It is there even in our lives online.

A contemporary manifestation of this other-directedness can be found not just in the pervasive use of text-messaging, especially among the young, as Turkle has shown, but also in our social media activity.<sup>13</sup> When on social media applications, we regularly post, reply, and engage with others’ posts and replies. We are directed towards those others we encounter on social media, and our activity is, given the interface design, one of interactivity. In each case, we are, as Carr claims, “consumed with a medium” (2010, 117). The given social media application will determine what specific forms this interactivity assumes. Indeed, as Carr and Turkle, especially, have shown, our increasingly regular use of smartphones means that our time by ourselves is mediated by screens and near-constant notifications, such that screens and notifications pull us away from ourselves and towards others. And as Turkle observes, although some kinds of other-directedness can enrich oneself and others, other forms of other-directedness can be enervating, or even toxic, for both oneself and others.

### **3. The Problematic Features of Discursive Activity on Social Media**

I now want to identify and describe the reasons why much of the discursive activity we find on social media is ethically impoverished. I will argue that the following reasons are most prominent: first, because social media interactions are mediated phenomenologically by digital technology, and more specifically, by screens; second, because our social media interactions with others are mediated through a paradigm of commodified discourse; third, because an inextricable feature of social media is what I shall call “discursive noise,” which refers to the stream of banal, crass, and often offensive ephemera, as well as what Heidegger calls “idle talk,” one finds on social media platforms; fourth, because social media platforms subject their users to a feeling of what I shall call “digital disorientation,” which characteristically makes its users feel that no matter “where” they are online, they should be “somewhere” else; and fifth, because social media users often feel as though they must adopt a mode of what I shall call “discursive tenacity.” These

features, while not exhaustive, help explain how much of the discursive activity on social media is ethically impoverished and falls short of dialogical discourse. They also help explain why so many of our online interactions, especially those of social media, feel so unsatisfying.

I want to suggest that the first reason why the discursive activity we find on social media takes ethically-impoverished, monological forms is because our social media interactions are mediated phenomenologically by digital technology's screens. Indeed, all our interactions with others online are, of course, mediated by a screen, and the screen's function depends on the modality of online activity. After all, not all the modalities of online activity are the same, of course. Most social media applications allow for both synchronous (i.e., live, face-to-face options) and asynchronous discursive activity. By synchronous, face-to-face activity, I mean the modalities of applications such as FaceTime, Zoom, and Skype, wherein two or more individual users are interacting live, simultaneously, and face-to-face (F2F) but not in-person. In such cases, the interaction that each shares with the other(s) is mediated by a screen. As Heidegger's discussion of equipment in *Being and Time* illustrates, barring breakdown, e.g., a frozen or buffering screen, the screen functions in its "readiness-to-hand" as a transparent conduit through which to see another person or persons; that is, in such cases, the instrument's *raison d'être* for the persons involved is to socialize face-to-face with another person. As Carr puts it, "The technology of the medium, however astonishing it may be, disappears behind whatever flows through it—facts, entertainment, instruction, conversation" (2010, 2). In such cases, dialogical action remains a real possibility.

But in most if not all asynchronous social media activity such as that on Instagram, Facebook (except its video messaging feature), Twitter, and TikTok,<sup>14</sup> the screen does not function as a transparent conduit—as it would when socializing synchronously with another person face-to-face (but not in-person)—but as the interface with which to interact. That is, the screen does not function merely as a means to an end as it does when using FaceTime, Skype, or Facebook's video calling feature; instead, the screen is itself inextricably bound up with, rather than merely a conduit for, the desired interaction. In such instances, it can accurately be said that one is interacting *with* the screen, not merely using the screen to interact with another. This applies even to activity in which one of the users is live-streaming video, as on Instagram's Reels or TikTok because in such cases the audience is still viewing the livestream as a performance much as they would a TV show. Because there is no synchronous, mutual, face-to-face engagement, the

screen cannot function transparently as a conduit through which to engage with and reply to one another.<sup>15</sup>

Yet even in our seemingly offline interaction with others in-person, what would otherwise be face-to-face engagement is, as Turkle and others note, increasingly mediated by screens. Consider people sitting with others in-person and using their phones to interact with those same people, say, by texting those sitting across from them at the table. As Turkle observes, people, especially the young, now integrate the online and the offline, moving seamlessly between offline and online conversations.<sup>16</sup> As Carr (2010)<sup>17</sup> and Turkle<sup>18</sup> discuss, such increasingly common integration arises because, as abundant scientific evidence has shown, our screens solicit our attention even when we are not looking at them. But the screen's presence, especially when it becomes obtrusive, can easily serve as a distraction from the potentially dialogical interaction and thereby diminish the extent to which the interlocutors can pay adequate attention to each other.

Moreover, I want to suggest that part of why our interactions with screens can be so unsatisfying is that they successfully solicit our attention, and they can even respond, but they cannot genuinely *reply*. And the fact that the screen cannot properly reply, in asynchronous contexts, means that the interaction loses its dialogical potential. Yet, even in synchronous contexts, when we get a reply from others online, the interaction is still mediated by a screen.

I now turn to the issue of commodified discourse. By saying that one feature of our social media experience is that of commodified discourse, I am referring primarily to three things. First, I mean the system in which social media applications and advertisers profit from social media users' activity via algorithms.<sup>19</sup> As is now well-known, algorithms have a powerful behind-the-scenes influence on Internet users' online experiences, especially on social media. Algorithms dictate what social media users are exposed to on their feeds, and provide users with content that they have consumed, 'liked,' and supported in the past. In this way, algorithms function largely to prevent users from seeing content they may not like or agree with, essentially restricting users' experiences to ideological echo chambers and feedback loops. Social media companies have a vested financial interest, as well, in using such algorithms to protect and advance corporations' economic goals through targeted advertising, thereby serving to maintain capitalism's hold on consumers.

Second, that there is a system of 'likes,' followers, etc. that serve as social media currency means that our social media personae are commodified in a way that they may not be in offline interactions. This issue is exacerbated by phenom-

ena like Instagram influencers who get paid sponsorships by companies to sell products, including themselves as a brand.<sup>20</sup> This means that many of our social media interactions are performative<sup>21</sup> and transactional to a degree that they often are not offline, and this helps explain why so many people feel that their social media interactions are often hollow or superficial.

Additionally, when people know their comment may be seen by many others, and that that comment can be validated through a system of ‘likes’ and other similar reactions, then it is more likely that people will make comments for the sole purpose of getting such validation, even if their comment is uncharitable or rude or mean.

The third aspect of commodified discourse is that social media interfaces are laid out in such a way that we often encounter each other online as disembodied beings, via profile pictures and usernames, which means that we are more likely to see another person online as a commodified object rather than a human being. These aspects of commodified discourse online illustrate how, in many ways, social media applications incentivize social media users’ infantilization<sup>22</sup> of themselves, and they also explain why there seems to be something inherently undignified about social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter.

I now want to discuss another feature characteristic of our social media experience, which I call “discursive noise.” Those familiar with social media know the sensory overload one can experience when looking at one’s ‘feed,’ which, as Carr shows convincingly, makes it harder to concentrate on a single task. Discursive noise refers specifically to the full range of interlocutory practices that we find online, especially on social media, that take an unhealthy form. It includes but is broader than the fact that we get omnipresent notifications not only when we are using social media but even when we are not.<sup>23</sup> Consider the click bait we frequently encounter online, with the ominous example of “99% of you all won’t read this, but. . .,” which is intended to elicit responses by those who think, “well, I’m not part of the 99%! I’m part of the 1%! <click>” Or the plethora of social media personality quizzes, or ads that influencers peddle.

Indeed, social media is an especially pernicious example of what Heidegger called the “They.” And social media discourse is often typified by Heidegger’s notions of “falling” and “idle talk.”<sup>24</sup> Consider how social media and its algorithms function to create and circulate what “they” are talking about now, what the most important news is that “one” must hear, and what trends “one” must know. We scroll, often mindlessly, and scan social media pages, searching for something

attention-worthy, only to move on to the next item, and repeat this ritual until we take a temporary break from social media and go on with our offline lives.

As democratizing<sup>25</sup> as some aspects of social media have undoubtedly been, there is a downside to how social media presents content. In a given social media session, we often see hundreds of posts and comments presented alongside one another. Furthermore, social media applications typically present posts as qualitatively undifferentiated, even if some posts are marked as more popular than others. Such popularity distinguishes between more and less valuable posts, but this value is largely understood quantitatively according to the number of user reactions. And the visual layout presents content as though it is all equally valid and credible, regardless of its source, with nothing being any more inherently relevant than anything else.

This characteristic applies not just to the applications' layout but to the particular discursive activity therein. As Prado puts it,

Giving everyone a voice on every topic significantly lessens the value of opinions by reducing them to the lowest common denominator. When everyone's opinion is voiced, regardless of knowledge or its lack and perceptiveness or its lack, expressed opinions collectively lose force [. . .] Expressed opinions cease to prompt reflection when too numerous and leveled regarding their authority. (Prado 2016, loc. 107–17)

Prado also notes that “reasoned argument and presentation have given way to the mere listing of takes on various issues and the drawing of unsubstantiated conclusions” (Prado 2016, loc. 97). This characteristic of social media discourse contributes to “the growing attitude that mere presentation of one's opinions is the whole point of communication and that all one need know about interlocutors is their opinions” (Prado 2016, loc. 97). All this means that no matter how limited our social media groups, we often find ourselves assailed, in some sense, by what everyone is saying all the time. Our social media experience is typically a noisy one in which it is difficult to distinguish the discursive wheat from the chaff.

I now want to discuss the penultimate feature of social media on which I focus in this paper—what I am calling “digital disorientation.”<sup>26</sup> The Internet's expansiveness is a central reason for this phenomenon. Given the sheer expanse of activity that digital communication technologies make possible, our relation to such technologies typically lacks a sense in which we can feel grounded and fully present. Undoubtedly, the immense number of possible websites available to explore and information to consume is something we can find comforting because



it presents the possibility of near-limitless content. But I want to suggest that it is, more than anything else, unsettling. Digital disorientation is our feeling that, no matter where we are online, we should be doing something else somewhere else online, and this is especially true of social media. While we may temporarily feel spatially content somewhere in particular online, that feeling is inherently fleeting by the sheer size of the Internet.<sup>27</sup> Digital disorientation, then, can be understood as the inherent difficulty of feeling like we can ever feel at home online.<sup>28</sup> This is one of the reasons, I suspect, why many people confine their online activity to a relatively small range of websites. In an online landscape without boundaries, we feel the need to impose them on ourselves, in part, because we find the alternative too overwhelming.

Much of our online activity in general and our social media activity in particular is of course characterized by browsing. When browsing, I am typically not looking for anything in particular as I would if I were conducting a search. This accurately captures one aspect of social media use. Yet in another sense, even when it seems like I am just browsing, I am nevertheless looking for *something, anything* that can capture my attention and make me feel rewarded. In this sense, even my browsing is a kind of searching, but it is an open-ended search with perhaps no specific criteria by which to determine when something is relevant or attention-worthy. And as soon as I find something on which to settle my attention, I quickly feel the need to find something else to look at. And this process continues.

I suggested above that one underappreciated feature of our relationship with social media is that it is always a little unsatisfying. Indeed, digital disorientation factors into this. Because if we always feel that we should be somewhere else online—or that somewhere else online might be better—then we are always going to feel that whatever satisfaction we get online is imperfect and perhaps wanting. Moreover, that we always feel, when online, as if we should be somewhere else makes it more likely that we will interact with others from a place of irritability rather than tranquility.

I now want to consider the final feature I identified at the outset, what I am calling “discursive tenacity.”<sup>29</sup> Tenacity is typically understood as a wholly positive personal trait. I am using it in a decidedly more negative sense. Drawing on Turkle’s work, I conceive of discursive tenacity pejoratively to refer to the fundamental orientation many social media users often adopt in their interactions, typically characterized by aggressive, stubborn, and uncharitable attitudes, actions, and expressions of beliefs towards others. Thus, discursive tenacity is not mere intransigence nor is it reducible to our epistemic activity, although it certainly

includes it. I use this specific term because it captures this fundamental orientation more perspicuously than simply saying that we are often rude or unkind to one another online. It also captures how on social media, it is, paradoxically, often in our effort to present the best versions of ourselves that we end up enacting the worst versions of ourselves.

We are all familiar with the frequent observation that one obvious reason many social media users say things online that, offline, they would never say to someone's face is because, at least in those instances in which such online activity usually occurs, the face-to-face dynamic is absent; that is, the poster is not held immediately accountable by the face of an interlocutor. Or, perhaps, the poster retains their anonymity entirely.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Levinas' work on the ethics of the face surely helps explain this feature of our online experience. But there is also the fact that some of the possible repercussions one may encounter in person are absent online, including the possibility that one's rude, offensive, or outrageous actions in person might subject their executor to being punched in the face or some similar retributive response. These aspects no doubt help explain social media users' tendency to be discursively tenacious.

Another reason is that the scroll-and-react ritual has fundamentally altered the way we respond to others online. Indeed, such a ritual often means that we are simply reacting hastily to others online rather than taking time to reply carefully. That we are often reacting rather than genuinely replying also helps explain the lack of epistemic humility we typically find online because when we rush to react, we are less likely to consider the way we are responding.<sup>31</sup>

There can certainly be a lack of epistemic humility in face-to-face conversations,<sup>32</sup> but social media interactions make it easier for those who might otherwise assume an orientation of epistemic humility in a face-to-face setting to assume an orientation entirely lacking in epistemic humility while online.<sup>33</sup> People posting on social media can—and often do—adopt an authoritative stance that they would not in face-to-face interactions—and which they may not have any reasonable right to claim.<sup>34</sup> Consider the frequency with which people begin social media posts with: “I don't know who needs to hear this, but. . .” or end a post with “Thank you for coming to my TedTalk” or the not uncommon “It's not my job to educate you” response. Or the way people, assuming a position of epistemic and moral authority, chastise others to “do better.”<sup>35</sup> In a classroom or at a public lecture, there is the expectation of having some topic or idea explained to you by the speaker who, by virtue of their position, occupies an authoritative role. Indeed, this dynamic is an implicit part of the agreement to be in the classroom. But this

dynamic is not implicit in our online social media interactions.<sup>36</sup> That there is often so little epistemic humility online means that such social media activity is less likely to be dialogical because the interlocutors are not listening and responding to others with sufficient care.

#### **4. The Offline Effects of Our Online Discourse**

As I have shown, that our social media interactions are mediated by screens makes it more likely that the screens become obtrusive and adversely affect the quality of the potentially-dialogical interaction taking place. That our social media discourse is characteristically commodified makes it more likely that users will see others as commodified objects and their interactions with others as transactional. These two features of our social media experience undoubtedly contribute as well to the sense of digital disorientation users have online. Moreover, the relationships between digital disorientation, discursive noise, and discursive tenacity are mutually (and viciously) reinforcing. That is, social media users' tendency to be discursively tenacious contributes to the discursive noise found online, but the presence of discursive noise also makes it more likely that people will be discursively tenacious in order to feel like their voice is heard above the noise. But the discursive tenacity found online contributes to users' digital disorientation, as well. And yet, the fact that people feel "digitally disoriented" or unmoored while online makes it more likely that they will be discursively tenacious.

As I claimed at the outset, social media activity has other-directedness and interactivity as two of its main features. This is part of its allure. Undoubtedly, the paucity of dialogical interactions in social media users' offline lives may make them more likely to seek out such interactions online. As Turkle claims, "The feeling that 'no one is listening to me' plays a large part in our relationships with technology. That's why it is so appealing to have a Facebook page or a Twitter feed—so many automatic listeners" (2015, 357). Yet, online interactions are unlikely to yield the dialogical engagement that many social media users seek because social media's promise of interactive, other-directed experiences often belies how we are allowed and encouraged to be less than fully invested in our interactions with one another. Indeed, the very promise of other-directedness and interactivity, when mediated by the problematic features described above, can save us from having to do the genuinely dialogical work for which sustained concentration and attentiveness is required.

Furthermore, because of the increasingly seamless integration of our online and offline lives and the way that our online experiences habituate us in our of-

line ones, our offline, in-person interactions seem to influence our online social media interactions, which then likely influence our offline, in-person interactions, although the extent to which this is the case requires further research. The unhealthy, often monological activity social media users often engage in online makes it more likely perhaps that they will carry such attitudes and practices into their offline lives. The vicious cycle is underway.

## Notes

1. I would be remiss not to mention one long-standing aspect of debates over the uses and effects of digital technologies, especially since it features in my concerns below—namely whether digital technologies are mere instruments at our disposal and completely within our control, free for us to use as we see fit, or whether, as Heidegger (1977), Ellul (1964; 2018), Turkle (2011; 2015), Carr (2010), Fairfield (2016), Tiles and Oberdiek (2014), and others argue, such technologies can assume a life of their own and begin to govern our actions in perhaps unforeseen and insidious ways; or, perhaps whether neither paradigm's perspective is entirely accurate and the truth is some combination of both. (See especially Tiles and Oberdiek and Chapter Three from Carr's *The Shallows*.) As Tiles and Oberdiek and Carr note, both camps make noteworthy points. However, it is undeniable that digital technologies—and technology writ large as a worldview, as Heidegger claimed—do exert control over and thereby shape us in our very use of them, especially considering the addictive properties these technologies possess. There are now many studies that show how addicted people are to their smartphones and social media. For some discussions of this issue, see Carr 2010, especially 232–34, Turkle 2015, and Prado's chapter in Prado 2016.

2. For a now-classic study that discusses technology as a comprehensive worldview, see Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 1977.

3. I want to be clear that, although I focus in this paper on the adverse effects of developments in digital technology, and especially social media, not everyone agrees that these developments are uniformly bad. There are some studies that have questioned whether digital technology's effects are as negative as many claim and offered data to suggest that they are not. See, for example, Orben and Przybylski 2019 and Vanden Abeele 2020.

4. As Turkle observes in her *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, "From the early days, I saw that computers offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship and then, as the programs got really good, the illusion of friendship without the demands of intimacy. Because, face-to-face, people ask for things that computers never do. With people, things go best if you pay close attention and know how to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Real people demand

responses to what they are feeling. And not just any response” (2015, 7). And as Prado puts it, “Our interactions with one another still require nonverbal communicative elements that are learned and mastered, and which work effectively, only in face-to-face interaction where the sheer presence of another or others affects so much of what we think, say, and do. Facial expressions and body language can be learned, employed, and read successfully only through direct contact with others” (2016, loc. 107). For further discussion of how smartphone and social media use is making its users lonelier and less able to be alone, see also Turkle’s *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, 2011. For interesting discussions of whether empathy is possible in our online interactions, see Thomas Fuchs’ “The Virtual Other: Empathy in the Age of Virtuality” (2014) and Lucy Osler’s “Taking Empathy Online” (2021).

5. Before proceeding, I want to make a brief note regarding terminology. For many people throughout the world, the lines between their online lives and their offline lives have become completely blurred. In fact, the very term “offline” is drawn from the complementary notion of life “online.” And yet we cannot replace such paired concepts with “online” and “real,” respectively, precisely because the disintegration of the boundary between our online and offline lives means that our real lives not only include but, to a significant extent, *are* our online ones. So, while the lines between the online and offline, or virtual, are increasingly harder to trace, I will retain the use of the terms while making note, when appropriate, of when such a distinction does not hold so clearly. For a discussion of this issue, see Coxon 2016.

6. See Carr’s 2010, 115; Turkle 2015, and Prado 2016. Certainly, one of the most significant changes in people’s behavior is that, as Turkle notes, “we have all learned to put our face-to-face relationships ‘on pause’ when we send or receive a text, image, email, or call” (2015, 124). Prado similarly observes the increasing prioritization of a “cellphone or smartphone message or call” “over an ongoing [face-to-face] conversation” (2016, 3).

7. I should be clear that in this paper I am not drawing on the insightful “dialogical self theory” as founded and developed by Hubert Hermans, et al. See Hermans 2001; 2012a, 2012b, Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon 1992, Hermans and Kempen 1993, Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010, Hermans and Gieser 2014, and Hermans and Dimaggio 2016. See also Hevern (2019), who draws on Hermans’ framework to discuss digital media technology, in Hevern 2019.

8. See Warfield 2016, 2017, and 2019.

9. This reminds one of Oscar Wilde’s observation from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “You must have a cigarette. A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?” (2004, 43).

10. I want to be clear that I do not want to underestimate the value that some online communities can have for those marginalized in their offline lives, such as for

LGBTQIA communities, and the importance that using online forums to connect with others can have for people who lack such support systems where they live. But my concerns in this paper are not targeted toward such online communities and the genuinely positive impact they can have for people who need and deserve them.

11. There are obvious exceptions to this, of course. The online troll, while typically seeking some type of response, or at least reaction, from others, nevertheless engages in such activity not to genuinely engage and connect with another. There are also those cases in which, as my discussion of discursive tenacity will show, more regular, relatively good-faith users of social media may act in decidedly non-dialogical ways while believing their actions are moved by sincere, dialogically-oriented motivations. But in such cases, their discursive misfires, so to speak, are the result of ignorance of how to act dialogically and not the malice of intentionally monological infelicities.

12. See Taylor 1989 and 1992.

13. In *The Shallows*, Carr quotes the psychotherapist Michael Hausauer, who notes that young people especially have a “terrific interest in knowing what’s going on in the lives of their peers, coupled with a terrific anxiety about being out of the loop” (2010, 118). As Carr adds, “If they stop sending messages, they risk becoming invisible” (2010, 118). Hausauer’s quote is cited from Katie Hafner’s “Texting May Be Taking a Toll,” in *The New York Times*, May 25, 2009.

14. As Paul Fairfield notes in “Social Media and Communicative Unlearning: Learning to Forget in Communicating,” although the particular digital and social media applications will inevitably change over time, “these media will be replaced, but with more of the same kind” (Prado 2016, 111), and the broader technological worldview will only continue unabated in increasingly sophisticated forms.

15. See Carr 2010, 126–27, for a discussion of examples of experiments that show the screen itself can become obtrusive.

16. Turkle describes an experience she had with “twenty-five young people, from eighteen to twenty-four” (2015, 34), in which she is invited to their WhatsApp group chat. Having accepted their invite, Turkle notes: “Now we are together in the room and online. Everything changes. Everyone is always ‘elsewhere’ or just getting on their way. With everyone on the app, people switch rapidly between the talk in the room and the chat on their phones [ . . . ] In the room, the topic turns to how hard it is to separate from family and high school friends during college. But it is hard for this discussion to go very far because it is competing with the parallel activity of online chat and image curation” (2015, 35).

17. In his afterword to *The Shallows*, Carr discusses some scientific studies that show convincingly how much power screens have to solicit our attention even when we are not using them (2010, 228–30).

18. In *Reclaiming Conversation*, Turkle states, “We have learned that even a silent phone inhibits conversations that matter. The very sight of a phone on the land-

scape leaves us feeling less connected to each other, less invested in each other” (2015, 4). Turkle cites Andrew Przybyliski and Netta Weinstein (2012) and Shalini Misra, Lulu Cheng, Jamie Genevie, et al. (2014).

19. I do not discuss algorithms at length in this paper, but much more can be said of them, of course. One of their additional features, which is relevant to my discussion here, is how they make it more likely that people will become fanaticized—that is, develop more and more extreme beliefs and views—by social media content and behavior they find online. For a work that treats the issue of algorithms in much greater depth, see Zuboff 2019.

20. Consider, for instance, the more singularly, monologically performative aspect to social media activity on applications such as Instagram or TikTok which is not present, at least to the same degree, in activity grounded in face-to-face interaction.

21. See Turkle’s conversation with one of her interviewees, Sharon, in *Reclaiming Conversation*, in which Sharon notes that “all interactions, certainly, have an element of performance. But online, she feels involved in her performances to the point that she has lost track of what is performance and what is not” (2015, 24).

22. In Prado 2016, Khadija Coxon notes, “The case of Facebook suggests that social media spaces reshape users’ understandings of self-expression and self-actualization, willing users voluntarily to infantilize themselves in the service of social media companies’ efforts to accumulate attention” (2016, 44–45). This infantilization occurs, I want to suggest, in part, through social media users’ 1) employment of ‘likes’ and emojis as substitutes for more genuine and dynamic self-expression and 2) desire to receive ‘likes’ and emojis as external validation for their self-expression.

23. See Carr 2010, 131–34.

24. In his *Heidegger: An Introduction*, Richard Polt describes Heidegger’s notion of “falling”: “I find myself in front of a magazine rack in a bookstore. Hundreds of colorful publications on every topic draw my attention. I flip through a magazine about celebrity gossip, then skim a computer journal, then wonder what today’s newspaper has to say and devour the headlines there. I am fascinated by all this material, absorbed in it, but in a superficial way—I do not pay much attention to any particular item, since I am already flitting on to the next. . . . Although I have been ‘brought up to date’ on what people are talking about, I have the nagging, irritating feeling of having wasted my time, and I cannot say that I have learned anything of consequence” (1997, 75).

25. As Prado observes, “Just as important as the greatly expanded connectivity among individuals is that social media sites, like Twitter and Facebook, have given people a voice they never had before. Anyone can post a comment or opinion on a host of Internet sites. It is now possible to make your views known to literally millions of people beyond those you deal with face to face” (2016, 1–2). And as Coxon puts it in “Attention, Emotion, and Desire in the Age of Social Media,” “Some feel that social media enhances social life, instantly connecting us across space and time and insti-

gating democratizing, equalizing, and otherwise progressive social transformations,” (Prado 2016, 37).

26. This digital disorientation is different from yet not unrelated to Mark Kingwell’s observations about our boredom and restlessness online, as I shall focus on a general existential mood rather than on the specific role of desires, as Kingwell does. See Kingwell’s chapter in Prado (2016) titled “Bored, Addicted, or Both: How We Use Social Media Now,” 15–35, as well as his book *Wish I Were Here: Boredom and the Interface* (2019).

27. See Carr 2010, 220.

28. See Heidegger’s description of “curiosity” in *Being and Time*, where he says that it has “the character of ‘*never dwelling anywhere*’” (2008, 217–18; italics original).

29. It is well-documented that digital technology, and more specifically social media, dependency has adversely affected our tendency, if not our capacity, for acting with kindness towards others online, but “discursive tenacity” is a more fundamental phenomenon.

30. We are, in one sense, often much less accountable for what we post and say online. This is especially the case when people can post anonymously. But, in another sense, we are sometimes held much more accountable for our behavior than we would be offline. Comments posted on social media that the poster eventually deletes can be screenshot, and comments which remain posted can always be revisited time and again. This means that people can return, whenever they choose, to read such posts, and the possibility of repeated readings creates the prospect that such posts can become imprinted upon the reader in ways that the everyday linguistic utterances of lived, offline conversations may not. This is simply because, except for those possessing an eidetic or near-perfect memory, our ability to remember with absolute certainty and clarity what someone said is often compromised by the procession of time. Thus, most people end up forgetting the exact wording that others use with us in lived, offline conversation. This does not necessarily apply online: that any social media comment avails itself of being screenshot means that, even if the comment is eventually edited or deleted, the original content can assume an indelible form, even in its very retractability.

31. For an additional reason that explains people’s lack of epistemic humility online, see Carr 2010, 237. Of course, one can take one’s time to reply and still be uncharitable, rude, or mean.

32. It is not uncommon, of course, for some people to assume a (perhaps unwarranted) position of epistemic authority outside the context of a traditional educational setting, for instance.

33. As Turkle says, “We have learned that people who would never allow themselves to be bullies in person feel free to be aggressive and vulgar online. The presence



of a face and a voice reminds us that we are talking to a person. Rules of civility usually apply. But when we communicate on screens, we experience a kind of disinhibition” (2015, 166).

34. As Prado notes in their Introduction to *Social Media and Your Brain: Web-Based Communication is Changing How We Think and Express Ourselves*, “Internet connectivity, use of social media, and texting practices foster abbreviated ways of communicating as well as indifference to evidential support for assertions or claims made” (2016, loc. 91–92).

35. Consider, as well, the social media practice of including handclap emojis after each word that one writes in a post, which is especially prominent on Twitter—and how jarring such a practice would be in a conversation offline. It is an undoubtedly tenacious—and off-putting—rhetorical device.

36. Consider also that the chance for people of differing political views to engage in a genuine conversation on an application like, say, Facebook is diminished by the fact that it lacks the potential privacy of an in-person conversation. Both people know that others can see and thereby judge their comments—and that others can interject—so it makes it less likely for both people to approach the situation with humility and a genuine willingness to ask questions and let their guard down. For example, if a disagreement arises in the Facebook comments section, it becomes increasingly difficult for the to-and-fro of reason-giving to emerge and it is more likely that one interlocutor can simply overwhelm the other in an avalanche of words. This is indicative of monological action. See Prado 2016, 83.

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