Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines!

**Issue #15, 1 (December 2018)
Compiled & Edited by *Philosophy
Without Borders***

Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines! is delivered online in (occasionally discontinuous) weekly installments, month by month.

Its aim is to inspire critical, reflective, synoptic thinking and discussion about contemporary issues--in short, *public philosophizing* in the broadest possible, everyday sense.

Every installment contains (1) excerpts from one or more articles, or one or more complete articles, that recently appeared in online public media, (2) some follow-up thoughts for further reflection or discussion, and (3) a link or links for supplementary reading.
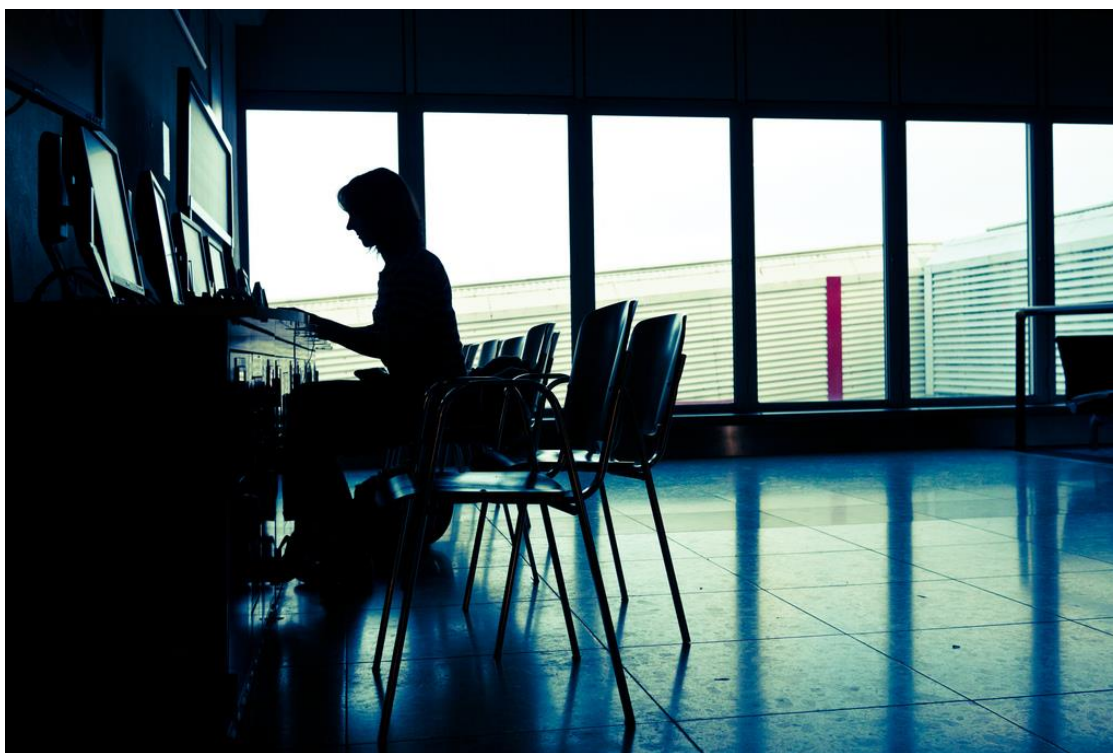
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1. "Log Off"

By Benjamin Y. Fong

Jacobin, **29 NOVEMBER 2018**

Full article available at URL = https://jacobinmag.com/2018/11/log-off-facebook-twitter-social-media-addiction

An internet café in Austin, Texas. Christian Payne / Flickr.

Social media will always be destructive for the Left. We should log the fuck off.

The fantasy of social media as a magical tool of social connection contrasts starkly with its reality as a cesspool of vicious personal attacks and paranoid indignation.

It is tempting to attribute this yawning gap to unregulated capitalism: Facebook and Twitter have virtually no competition and are perfectly comfortable doing everything from manipulating user data to providing a platform for hate speech so long as it is in the interest of their bottom line. Perhaps taking social media out of private control would allow us finally to realize the fantasy that sustains it.

This is the animating thought behind Evan Malmgren's recent piece, "Socialized Media," which outlines what it might mean to rein in the excesses of the digital platform giants. Rather than artificially reintroduce competition through an antitrust campaign or regulate these services as public utilities (or even nationalize them), Malmgren argues that we ought rather to see "social media as a public commons" and hand "collective power over digital platforms to the people they connect." In his view, the state should not act as a "final custodian" of collective data reserves but rather, given the transnational nature of these corporations, as an intermediary in the transition to user cooperatives.

Interesting as it is to think through the various ways in which we might socialize the platform monopolies, Malmgren leaves unexamined a basic question: Is social media worth saving?

In a socialist society, we would take advantage of the scientific and technical know-how achieved in capitalism in order to produce at roughly the same levels but without the private appropriation of that production or the destruction of the planet. In some cases, this might mean the socialization and reorientation of an already existing industry — banking, for example — but in other cases it probably means straightforward elimination or at least drastic downsizing.

It is unimaginable, for instance, that the auto industry would be even a fraction of its current size under socialism. We would no doubt harness the power of locomotion to move people around, but this would involve things like expanding and improving our railway systems rather than providing "cars for all."

We can recognize, in the case of cars, a basic ideological and practical manipulation of public consciousness: the auto industry has not only convinced people that cars represent the freedom to be able to get around but also done a great deal to prevent the development of and degrade already existing public transportation. While we might actually need cars in a capitalist society, we won't need nearly as many of them in one designed for people and sustainability rather than profit.

Perhaps it is similar with social media. Under capitalism, where people spend most of their lives working jobs they do not like and are lacking in opportunities for unstructured sociability, it makes sense that they would spend a good deal of their "free time" binging on short bursts of prescribed "social" interaction. Malmgren is certainly right that putting digital platforms under

democratic control would likely lead to them being designed to be less addictive and less manipulative. But if we all had ten-hour-a-week jobs, and by extension the time to engage in more meaningful pursuits of our own choosing, would we spend that much time looking at screens?

The question here is whether the negative effects of platform capitalism on our lives are specific to capitalism, in which case these platforms would be legitimate social goods if freed from the predations of the market, or whether these platforms, like private automobiles, are so inextricably tied to the destructive norms of capitalist society that they would likely disappear or greatly reduce in importance under socialism.

To answer this question, let's start with a shocking fact: bad behavior happens on the internet. It occurs in real life, too, of course. But there is a special quality to the depravity exhibited on social media that is particular to that domain.

On the one hand, it is unthinking, and in the case of Twitter, this goes along with the character limit. But it also demonstrates a psychopathic character contradiction: an obsession with self-perception by others in combination with a disturbing lack of empathy toward many of those same others from whom one is seeking, implicitly or explicitly, validation.

For many researchers, this behavior is not merely expressed on but actively *shaped by* social media. In a meta-analysis of seventy-two studies, the psychologist Sara Konrath and her research team found that empathy levels among college students are 40 percent lower today than they were twenty years ago — a development they attribute to, amongst other things, the "rising prominence" of "media use in everyday life": "With so much time spent interacting with others *online* rather than in reality, interpersonal dynamics such as empathy might certainly be altered."

This explanation is validated by a study in *Cyberpsychology* that found little human connection forged through online and text messaging, despite attempts to "warm up" conversation with all caps, typed laughter, emoticons, and the like. The Stanford cognitive psychologist Clifford Nass similarly found "negative social well-being" associated with high levels of media use.

Most terrifyingly, this acclimation to digital connection over human conversation creates a negative feedback loop: the more one becomes accustomed to distanced and controllable human interaction, the more actual human conversation begins to appear persecutory and uncomfortably spontaneous and thus something to be avoided. According to sociologist Sherry Turkle, "real people, with their unpredictable ways, can seem difficult to contend with after one has spent a stretch in simulation."

Much research has also confirmed that social media is reinforcing an increasing sense of social isolation. Already back in 1998, a group at Carnegie Mellon conceived of the "Internet paradox," wherein more connection online results in increased loneliness. This problem has only become more acute in the age of Facebook and Twitter, though researchers and commentators are hesitant to say that these platforms are *causing* loneliness: it is less that Facebook is driving atomization than that it is a perfect complement to and reinforcer of growing loneliness.

And feeling lonely, Facebook users naturally seek out any validation they can get. In this, one study from Australia is very blunt: "Facebook users have higher levels of total narcissism, exhibitionism, and leadership than Facebook nonusers. In fact, it could be argued that Facebook specifically gratifies the narcissistic individual's need to engage in self-promoting and superficial behavior."

Paradoxically, the lonely behavior reinforced by social media has not been accompanied by more time to simply be *alone*: social media helps ensure that we are not given much time to sit with our thoughts in prolonged self-reflection. This means in turn that we are not pressed to tolerate and negotiate boredom, widely acknowledged as a crucial developmental achievement. Once again, Turkle expresses the problem eloquently: "without solitude, in days and nights of continual connection, we may experience those 'moments of more' but lives of less."

Given all of this, Malmgren's claim that "platform users themselves represent the ideal polity for a democratic model of governance" appears strange. How is it that people acclimated to a lack of self-reflection, empathy, and genuine human conversation *by the platforms themselves* represent an "ideal polity for a democratic model of governance"? Democratic governance requires institutions that habituate people to democratic deliberation and decision-making, a process that requires the kind of "hard conversations" that Jane McAlevey encourages. Is Twitter really captured in this description?

Recently a term for excessive internet usage has been popularized that the digital giants have long used to describe their desired aim: behavioral addiction.

Behavioral addiction is very similar to substance addiction: according to Adam Alter, "they activate the same brain regions, and they're fueled by some of the same basic needs: social engagement and social support, mental stimulation, and a sense of effectiveness." But behavioral addiction does not bear the same stigma as substance addiction. Herein lies the danger: we have a category of social marginalization for people like heroin *addicts*, and it's unthinkable that we all participate to some degree in the supposedly socially marginal.

The tech companies have no such reservations. They actively design their products to be "binge-worthy," objects of obsession and addiction. We are encouraged, as in all things neoliberal, to take responsibility for our own habits. But as "design ethicist" and Silicon Valley defector Tristan Harris says, "that's not acknowledging that there's a thousand people on the other side of the screen whose job is to break down whatever responsibility I can maintain."

There is perhaps no better sign of the addictive danger of these platforms than that the rich don't let their kids use them. Tech gurus from Steve Jobs to Chris Anderson have strictly limited their kids' time online, and while public schools are flooded with iPads to create "hybrid-learning" environments — the technological solution to teacher shortages — Silicon Valley engineers are eager to send their kids to device-free, private Waldorf schools.

As Alter explains, "the people producing tech products" follow "the cardinal rule of drug dealing: never get high on your own supply."

The lack of empathy, self-reflection, and genuine sociability that are characteristic of excessive social media use thus might be understood as the symptoms of a kind of addiction, a sickness from which the wealthy are knowledgeable and well-off enough to inoculate their children but uncaring enough to infect everyone else.

This view must, however, be complemented from the social perspective. For in addition to producing and reinforcing an absence of connection and humanity, social media platforms, like all drugs, promise to *remedy* the absence of connection and humanity that are endemic to capitalist society.

As Wolfgang Streeck explains,

> in the absence of collective institutions, social structures must be devised individually bottom-up…. Social life consists of individuals building networks of private connections around themselves, as best they can with the means they happen to have in hand. Person-centred relation-making creates lateral social structures that are voluntary and contract-like, which makes them flexible but perishable, requiring continuous "networking" to keep them together and adjust them on a current basis to changing circumstances. An ideal tool for this are the "new social media" that produce social structures for individuals, substituting voluntary for obligatory forms of social relations, and *networks of users* for *communities of citizens*.

The ills of social media are thus not only problems; they are also "solutions" to historically specific and much larger *social* problems. In the absence of universal social programs and traditional community bonds, "social life in an age of entropy is by necessity individualistic," and social media is the perfect structure to accommodate this ultimately anti-social orientation. It alleviates the isolation and inhumanity of living in capitalist society while also contributing to that isolation and inhumanity. Like itching, it provides a form of relief that ultimately only exacerbates the problem.

It doesn't take much to convince someone of the various negative effects of social media usage, but these are often brushed aside as unfortunate by-products of a trend that is, on the whole, positive. "Sure, people do silly things on Twitter, and yes, maybe we're spending too much time talking with each other through DM's rather than in person. But social media also keeps us informed and connected in historically novel ways." Even the most trenchant critics of actually existing social media are careful to stop short of outright condemnation: "there is good stuff on social media, of course."

If we take the claims of the aforementioned studies seriously, however, it's not enough to say that social media has its "downsides." The overall picture painted here is of a *mental health crisis* — and indeed, one that is, if not caused by, at least reinforced by the platforms themselves.

According to Malmgren, "depression, anxiety, hate-mongering, fear, and conspiratorial untruths are all acceptable outcomes [for the platform monopolies] so long as they are expressed, consciously or otherwise, in the service of growth." While this is undoubtedly true, he takes this

fact to imply that freeing these platforms from the profit motive and putting them within the domain of democratic control would address the problems he enumerates.

The contrasting conclusion here is twofold: first, that simply being glued to screens to engage in prescribed "social" interaction is itself a worrisome phenomenon regardless of whether or not it is in the service of profit, and second that this phenomenon is a direct manifestation of the alienation we experience under capitalism. The generation of profit, in other words, is not the only way in which social media serves capitalism.

For the Left, then, social media presents an imminent threat: it attracts people who are natural fodder for socialist politics and then absorbs them in the unthinking narcissism of pseudo-political statement pronouncement, where they enter the negative feedback loop that distances them from the reality of everyday human engagement.

Twitter is thus not just a *medium of expression* for the "psychic pathologies" of what Mark Fisher described so well as the "Vampire Castle." *It is the Vampire Castle*, doing capitalism's work by further atomizing and distancing people from the kinds of conversations required for real political engagement. The sooner we realize this about social media, the sooner we can get to the work of dismantling it.

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2. Some Follow-Up Thoughts For Further Reflection and Discussion:

Is the following argument sound? If so, why? If not, why not?

1. Socialism—whether democratic socialism or social anarchism—is fundamentally concerned with respect for universal human dignity; with human freedom of thought, expression, choice, and action; with individual and collective creativity and flourishing; and with the universal satisfaction of true human needs.
2. Internet-based social media may appear to be highly promising and legitimate vehicles for the realization of socialist aims.
3. But in fact, social media are an essential part of the "military-industrial-university-*digital* complex" that not only produces widespread *mind-control and mental slavery*, but has also enabled a worldwide *mental health crisis* of social media addiction.
4. Therefore, anyone who recognizes the value of the fundamental concerns of socialism should (i) engage in a serious critical analysis of social media, (ii) "log the fuck off" on a regular basis, or detach from social media altogether, in order to resist their largely malign influence, and

also (iii) collectively commit to subverting and dismantling the system of social media itself.

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3. Three Links For Supplementary Reading:

Addicted to Social Media?

Why It's As Hard To Escape An Echo Chamber As It is To Flee A Cult

If The Internet Is Addictive, Why Don't We Regulate It?

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BACK ISSUES

ISSUE #14, 3 (November 2018):

- **WHY YOU SHOULD EXIT THE PROFESSIONAL ACADEMY**

HERE: PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue14-3_nov18

ISSUE #14, 2 (November 2018):

- **BULLETS, CORPSES, DOCTORS, & THE NRA**

HERE: PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue14-2_nov18

ISSUE #14, 1 (November 2018):

- **CRIME-&-PUNISHMENT INC, USA**

HERE: PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue14-1_nov18

ISSUE #13, 2 (September 2018):

- **ABOLISH ICE!, AND HUNGARY'S STARVATION TACTICS**

HERE: PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue13-2_sept18

ISSUE #13, 1 (September 2018):

- **UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME AND THE FUTURE OF POINTLESS WORK**

HERE: PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue13-1_aug18

ISSUE #12, 3 (AUGUST 2018):

- **THE TRUTH ABOUT INCOME INEQUALITY, IN SIX AMAZING CHARTS**

HERE: PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue12-3_aug18

ISSUE #12, 2 (AUGUST 2018):

- **EPISTOCRACY, NOT DEMOCRACY?**

HERE: PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue12-2_aug18
ISSUE #12, 1 (AUGUST 2018):

- **THE QUANTIFIED HEART**

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ISSUE #11, JULY 2018:

- **RESISTING IMMIGRATION & CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE), AUTHENTICITY, RECIPROCITY VS. TOLERANCE, HOMELESSNESS-&-US, & FREE SPEECH VS. JUST ACCESS**

HERE: PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue11_july18

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- **JOBS-&-HAPPINESS, UBI IN FINLAND, THE SOCIAL VALUE OF ENVY, THE EDUCATED ELITE'S STRANGE FAILURE, & ARE WE JUST OUR BRAINS?**

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HERE: PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue9_may18

ISSUE #8, APRIL 2018:

- **CONSCIOUSNESS-DENIAL, MINDS-&-SMARTPHONES, THE MORALITY OF ADDICTION, & RADICAL GUN REFORM**

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- **THE MEANING OF LIFE & THE MORALITY OF DEATH**

HERE: PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue7_mar18

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- **POVERTY IN THE USA, MARX REDUX, & THE SCOPE OF MINDEDNESS**

HERE: PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue6_feb18

ISSUE #5, JANUARY 2018:

- **BAKERS, BUDDHISTS, PLANT MINDS, & TOTAL WORK**

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- **US POLITICS, ANIMAL MINDS, & REFUGEES**

HERE: [PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue4_dec17](#)

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HERE: [PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue3_nov17](#)

ISSUE #2, OCTOBER 2017:

- **FREE SPEECH WARS**

HERE: [PWB_philosophy_ripped_from_the_headlines_issue2_oct17](#)

ISSUE #1, SEPTEMBER 2017:

- **BORDERS AND IMMIGRATION, CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, & CULTURAL CONFLICT**

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