“I believe in the possibility of networks; that is why I endeavor to trace its imperfections, its perversions.” Variation of Franz Fanon

It’s sad to see the medical establishment called in to decide on the future of the media landscape. As social media concerns turned mainstream, framed as ‘overuse’, ‘addiction’, ‘anxiety’, ‘compulsion’, ‘harm’ or even ‘abuse’, it became inevitable that both cultural-artistic projects and the humanities’ ‘mediastudies’ approaches were marginalized. In their place enters the ‘hard’ evidence of lab-based social science. The scroll and swipe now subject to the scientific method – a new positivism of phone-life. This trend partly results from academic funding landscapes, which have always favored the production of hard facts and the promise of evidence for the next policy. But we can also say that as life moved online it was only a matter of time. We have been online for generations, and academic parents have watched their kids take to the screen. Finally, after two decades, one could say, the powers-to-be started to notice.

Today, even our social science colleagues in media and communication departments are being left out. Instead, white-coat authority is winning out. The fact that white coats appeal to older generations shows how social media debate has shifted away from young people as its prime audience to those in power. Michel Foucault’s medical discourse approach would be tempting to apply here. I will leave it with that suggestion. Such an approach is necessary yet predictable, and no longer dangerous. The medical gaze is an impotent one, no matter how hard empiricism tries to map the subliminal attraction. The overly visible shift of internet as a mental health issue is at least worth noting—and publicly discussing. The medicalization of social media research is a given. Is this a sign of regression? A bitter victory after so many waves of marginal critiques? Or a sign of how bad the ‘distraction’ has eaten itself to the core of society that only life-threatening alarmism, set off more than 15 years ago by Nicolas Carr and Sherry Turkle, is making a difference? Is this the price that is paid for the democratization of ‘attention research’? Less a theory of moral panic and more theory as moral panic?

Cognitive psychologists, hired by Silicon Valley over a decade ago, played a pivotal role in optimizing interface design such as the shift of

social networks to phone-based social media apps with its likes, followers and the endless scroll. In this sense, the language of the interface was always amenable to cognitive and behavioral experts. The pathologies were built in – a slight tilt of the media pharmakon scales and the poison leaks out. Such disciplinary awareness often seems absent in today's paper-driven research culture. An army of concerned cognitive psychologists, behavior scientists and pedagogists focus their do-good research exclusively on kids and teenagers, leaving adults and the companies themselves off the hook. The moral panic around our anxious youth has left media scholars with their own existential anxiety. Decades of platform critique echoed like voices in the desert, while whit-coat authority reverberates through the halls of government like a siren's call. The social media ban is crude, almost as blunt as the research underpinning it, but why haven't others been able to turn the policy dials?

Noticeable in all this is the absence of the word 'advertisement' in all their social-medical experiments. Social media giants such as Meta, Google, and TikTok are advertising companies and love to hide their revenue models. This early insight remains remarkably absent from psychological and pedagogical research. The focus is solely on quantifying screen time, as a stand in for the evils of social media. To note that all nuance is lost when being online is cast as the original media sin is to say the obvious, and yet we can't deny the media theory as moral panic is effective.

But while the damage to the young brain is evident, the medicalization of social media critique is not.

Looking at the popularized media representations of the research, we feel sorry for the rewired brains of the youngsters and teenagers. Neurologists wire the brains of a mother and her one-year-old who cries for attention while his mum is on her phone. Small kids yell when a tablet is taken away. Toddlers have emotional breakdowns because they can't keep up with the fast pace of video editing. Without noticing, the attention shifts from rage over Big Tech and the still-invisible alternatives to pity. We feel sorry. These children need care, while the people with an addiction are not strong enough to overcome the temptation to doomscroll, or shop. Responsibility for

these social harms is too often individualized or located in the family unit, the school, or the neighborhood. How many parents find themselves in ‘phone free children’ WhatsApp groups? The irony. If white-coat authority is taking over media criticism, ‘concerned parents’ is the imagined audience. Meanwhile, we are torn between the stripping of agency that comes with white-coat authority, and the fact that its interventions don’t go nearly far enough. Why should kids get a ‘get out of jail free’ card while the adults are left in platform misery? Two decades of lock-in has taken its toll. The cell is unlocked, we just need to walk out. Why is this so difficult?

Remember the whistleblowers, and do not forget to write your own review of the Frances Haugen film The Social Reckoning. While the cool crowds have moved on to AI, media theory and design are noticeably absent in the current social media arena, now that policy, education, and content policing are rolling out their (symbolic) interventions. What’s there to propose and to speculate about, now that social media are no longer new? The cultural field has become complicit, as most designers, artists, and curators are addicted Instagram users themselves. The new platform intellectuals can educate their audiences on the critical insights of Fisher’s Capitalist Realism, but InstaRealism haunts all attempts at platform-native criticality.

The last thing to defend is the supposedly ‘good sides’ of social media. Their architectures are fundamentally flawed and beyond repair. Better ways exist to overcome social isolation and loneliness. Community networks can easily replace current social media without algorithmic sorting, advertisements, or techno-political manipulation. A first step toward that is to face the platform logic itself, head-on. Why hasn’t the decentralized, free-software, open-source, public-stack logic appealed to younger audiences? Crypto became fashionable in certain circles. The geek element alone isn’t enough of an argument. Is it the lack of marketing? And why is the platform-type scaling still the only possible option? A worldwide or EU ban on platforms won’t happen, which means, more work for doctors and lawyers. What actually needs to be done is declare platforms outdated and outmoded. This is the powerful potential of SetUp’s Facebook Museum: Make Social Media History Again.

Attack the addiction framing. We're not victims and do not need help. The discourse of assistance is debilitating. Moderation and filtering won't do the job. Age is not the dividing line. The great app replacement is a tiny job in comparison to challenges humanity is facing such as social inequality, right-wing authoritarianism, militarism, and climate change. Communication architectures hold the key to resolving these. So far, social media has only contributed to the End Times Aesthetics.

Team Human cries for exchanges. Message streams can be reorganized easily, not based on 24/7 updates, creating an 'addictive' mix of personal communication, headlines, and short dopamine shots of entertainment, all in one app. Another Internet Remains Possible. This isn't rocket science and doesn't require a world war or the Manhattan Project. It's the end times for Big Tech, not for us. Question white coat power. We Are Not Sick. Let's repeat that to ourselves, time and again, and design slow tech, step by step. Until Instagram, TikTok and all the rest become profoundly uncool, and forgotten.

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