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MSc Philosophy of Science, Technology and Society

On the Moral Responsibility of Social Networking Sites

Existentialist Ethics and Harm to Freedom

MSc Thesis

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Summary

This thesis has been written to reflect on the effect of social networking sites (SNS) on the freedom of their users through the lens of a philosophical framework which has not extensively been used in philosophy of technology. I sought to answer the following questions: are social networking sites harming freedom and how can existentialist ethics provide a better understanding of this harm?

In order to answer these questions, I have relied on the analytical reading of primary and secondary sources, beginning the thesis with the review of selected views within the debate on SNS in an attempt to find common denominators in the assumptions which were made about freedom. In order to apply the framework of existentialism to this question to make the case for its added-value, I have then used Simone de Beauvoir's 1947 essay, the Ethics of Ambiguity, which lays out the applied ethics of existentialism. What I have found is a consensus on the fact that SNS do cause harm to freedom.

In the mainstream and philosophical literature which I discussed, this harm is often conceptualized as a loss of control or as a loss of power on the part of the users. I have explained that relying on the idea of control (or power) can generate challenging objections, and that equating freedom to control can fail to engage the responsibility of SNS if we do not consider that the loss of control on the users' part is substantial. Indeed, given that most of us choose to continue using SNS despite addictive algorithmic curation and well-known stories of widespread manipulation, it is best to rely on a framework which encompasses the reasons why we would choose to surrender freedom to SNS.

When applying existentialist ethics, I have as such found that harm to freedom can be conceptualized in a more nuanced manner and needs not be a binary opposition between, for instance, users and algorithms. Existentialist ethics has allowed me to review the way in which SNS are structured and the type of creation and conversation which they incentivize in the light of what de Beauvoir calls authenticity, and which amounts to the positive realization of freedom. I have found that, in our search for solutions to make SNS more ethical, we must take into account the fact that being free does not only mean being free "from", and that SNS, as much as they are a threat to freedom, also have the potential and the responsibility to positively contribute to freedom.

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Introduction

Problem matter

In the many discussions which are being held around our relationship to social media and the manner in which it affects our wellbeing, autonomy, and ultimately freedom, I am noticing that we are often invited to think in terms of binary oppositions. Upon the rather common finding that social networking sites (SNS) the like of Facebook can negatively affect the wellbeing of users, and that the more time is spent on it, the more true this becomes (Shakya, 2017), there are those who think that it is up to us to develop the necessary "self-discipline" to have a healthy relationship with social media (Graham, 2022), and those who think that social media companies have designed their products in a way that makes it, in any case, virtually impossible for us to have adequate control over our behaviours (Lanier, 2018). This way of thinking is common-sensical insofar as upon the discovery of a systemic problem, we seek to assign blame and responsibility, and that this can better be done if we either consider users to be responsible and platforms to be mere instruments, or platforms to be responsible and users to be casualties. However, neither proposition seems satisfactory in response to a problem which does not appear to be one dimensional: if Twitter is a hellscape (Chayka, 2022), why do we keep going on it?

I believe that even though we are capable of identifying a form of harm -often to wellbeing and to freedom- in our relationship to SNS, we have not yet coined its ambiguity, that is, among other things, the reason why so many of us are still drawn to social media despite constantly wondering if it is a waste of our time (Wynne, 2012; Totka, 2022). This, perhaps, is where the narrative according to which the problem is that SNS are too addictive and that we lack self-discipline comes from: after all, it must be that there is something wrong with us if we can't stop doing something which is bad for us.

Of course, the debate pertaining to freedom and SNS does not stop at this intuition and is more sophisticated in nature. Journalists, writers and philosophers rarely assign blame unequivocally to one side or to the other, to users or to SNS. However, I believe that more often than not, arguments can be traced back to an "either/or" pattern of thought. Take, for

instance, popular writers in the world of technology and "productivity" who are advocating for digital minimalism, meaning a drastically reduced use of technology for an improved quality of life (Newport, 2019). These authors often state that SNS are designed so as to hijack attention and that this is the reason why we must try to regain control (Hari, 2022). At first sight, the responsibility is assumed to be shared, but it is in the solutions which these discourses promote that a return to the binary appears: either stay on the platforms, or leave them to regain control (Newport, 2019; Lanier, 2018).

That is not to say that this particular solutions is inept, in the current state of affairs, it is perhaps better not to use social media, after all, but this does not bring the debate towards an exploitable understanding of the problem. This does not help us reflect on the nature of the harm to freedom (and not to control, productivity, or happiness) or on why, for the most part, we prefer to keep using social media despite knowing that we are perhaps surrendering to manipulative algorithms. Additionally, this does not explain how we could exercise freedom on SNS rather than retrieve freedom by quitting it.

Objective of the thesis and research question

The point of this thesis will be to gain a better understanding of this problematic by using an alternative conception of what "freedom" and "harm to freedom" means. Indeed, I think that our everyday understanding of freedom, which is often associated with the idea of being in control, can lead to the binary problem-solving (such as: quit social media to regain control) which I have mentioned and which I find unsustainable. Given that social media is integrated into society and that it is here to stay, I believe that it is best to try and understand its negative effects on freedom and the mechanisms thereof. As such, I will seek to prove two points in this thesis: firstly, that SNS do cause harm to the freedom of their users, and secondly, that in order to further understand this harm, we must adopt a different perspective on freedom.

The philosophical framework which I will rely on in order to do so is the doctrine of existentialist ethics, which has principally been developed by Simone de Beauvoir in her 194 essay The Ethics of Ambiguity. Although I cannot state with certainty that my findings will be conclusive, I hope, by way of the application of this framework, to see how harm to freedom

can be identified and conceptualized if we approach freedom differently, and to find answers regarding why we neglect this harm. I also hope to find clues which could help re-think SNS as a technology which promotes freedom.

The point of conceptualizing harm to freedom via a different philosophical framework is not only to avoid the pitfall of either/or responsibility and solutions, but it is also to challenge the definition of freedom which we usually adopt to reflect about our relationship to technology. I believe that shedding a new light on the question of SNS and freedom is necessary insofar as this technology, albeit omnipresent, remains fairly new and raises a number of ethical questions which have not yet been examined under a multiplicity of perspectives. Of course, that is not to say that the question of the impact of SNS on the value of freedom is not being addressed: both in the academic literature and in more mainstream contexts, it is discussed. However, and ultimately, in the midst of the discussion on all the values which SNS affect (think, for instance, about the extended debate on privacy), freedom has not necessarily received the attention it warrants. That is why a framework which revolves around a specific perception of freedom can, I believe, bring about relevant ideas.

This thesis will seek to answer the following questions: are social networking sites harming freedom and how can existentialist ethics provide a better understanding of this harm?

Methodology

In order to answer this question, I will rely on the analytical reading of primary and secondary sources.

I will begin this thesis by reviewing selected (and it is hoped, sufficiently representative) views among the existing debate on SNS and harm to freedom. This first chapter will, as such, consist in a comparison and assessment of different perspectives, both within the mainstream (books, websites, newspapers) and the philosophical literature. The aim of this chapter will be twofold:

- To identify the problems which are talked about the most in relation to the impact of SNS on the freedom of users.

- To find common denominators in the manner in which freedom is understood and see how it impacts the understanding of the above problems.

I chose to conduct this brief comparative review in lieu of a conceptual analysis of the understanding of "freedom" to which I will oppose the perspective of existentialism. That is because I intend to show the added value of a new perspective on freedom in opposition not to a single definition of freedom, but to a fluid representation of the concept based on common denominators (i.e. elements which are common to the majority of the narratives discussing freedom in life, fiction, and academic literature) such as the idea that being free is good, that freedom can be had or not had, that it can be taken away, or that being free means being able to do and say what one wants. As such, it is a multiplicity of conceptions of freedom sharing common bases to which I will oppose the existentialist conception; and this thesis does not seek to coin or evaluate any of these perspectives, but merely to provide a point of departure allowing the reader to understand which aspects of our understanding of freedom will be challenged by existentialist ethics.

Following this comparative review, I will use a primary source and will draw most of my argumentation from the analysis of the ideas contained in the Ethics of Ambiguity. In order to ensure that the framework is applied to the technology of SNS and that the analysis does not remain overly abstract, I will rely on journalistic accounts and on case-studies to include an understanding of the manner in which SNS function and how it affects the experience of users.

Note that I have written this thesis with a specific understanding of SNS in mind. SNS are broadly defined as websites or applications which are "designed to help people communicate and share information, photographs, etc. with a group" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). I do not believe that assimilating the impact of SNS which are used by millions to SNS which are used by hundreds is warranted. Similarly, I will not assimilate public platforms to private messaging platforms (such as Messenger, WhatsApp or Telegram) which, although they fall under the same definition, are designed for a different kind of communication (i.e. mostly between people who know each other) and would necessitate their own, separate impact analysis. Online forums such as Reddit technically fall under the same category, but I consider their functioning to be too dissimilar to be categorized with SNS (different algorithmic curation,

different way of displaying users feedback, etc). In any case, such forums tend to have slightly less daily active users, and will be put aside on this basis. Lastly, I will not be including SNS which are not widely used in the West, such as the Chinese platform Sina Weibo, for I do not have a sufficient understanding of their functioning.

The criteria which I have, as such, used to select the platforms about which I am talking are the following: the fact that they are public platforms allowing for conversations between strangers and the number of daily active users. This leaves me with an exhaustive list of the platforms which I include in this thesis' definition of SNS: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Tiktok. Those platforms have between 450 million and 2.93 billion monthly active users (BBC, 2023).

Structure

This thesis will start from the following question: what are we focusing on when we talk about social media and harm to freedom? This chapter will review the manner in which both the mainstream and the philosophical literature have identified harm to freedom on SNS. In doing so, I will seek to find patterns and potential shortcomings in the way in which freedom is usually discussed in this particular context. This is where the research gap will be identified as I will discuss the limitations of the current views (I). I will subsequently introduce the framework of existentialist ethics and will seek to make clear how it can bring about new and relevant ideas to the debate. I will specifically focus on de Beauvoir's work on the inauthentic attitudes (i.e. our failure to acknowledge and realize our freedom) which we display in our daily lives. I find this aspect of the Ethics of Ambiguity to be of interest precisely because of the ease with which it is possible to transfer this framework to practical situations and to speculate around where, in our relationship to a particular technology, harm to freedom can be identified (II). Following this finding, the third chapter of this thesis will consist in the application of the framework of existentialist ethics to the question of freedom on SNS. I will confront the manner in which SNS are designed and used to de Beauvoir's perspective on an ethical attitude (III). This will be of use both to identify harm and to reflect on potential solutions (IV).

Chapter I – SNS and Harm to Freedom: State of the Debate and Research Gap

Whilst it is impossible to cover all grounds and to provide an exhaustive overview of the discussion on SNS and freedom in the literature, I will try to bring about ideas which I find to be prominent and representative of the debate. In finding and describing those specific ideas, I am evidently biased by my own judgement and by the objective of this thesis. It is therefore best to acknowledge, before diving into this analysis, what I have focused on and what I have eluded:

- I am focusing on the harm to the freedom of individual users rather than to a collective (society, groups, etc). That is because I believe that, for the most part, what is thought to harm the freedom of users is what is ultimately also taken to harm society at large (for instance, filter bubbles are a problem which begin which each user and results in polarization, a societal phenomenon). As a matter of fact, many of the debates which I chose to review are touching on both individual users and society. Nevertheless, my point of departure has been the freedom of users, and I may as such have neglected literature discussing harm to the freedom of specific groups.

- Secondly, this selection of debates is largely focused on the question of SNS algorithms and does not necessarily seek to discuss other features, I believe that this choice is warranted by the fact that the majority of the discussions on SNS and freedom I have come across (ranging from polarization to addiction) ultimately can be drawn back to algorithmic curation. Without such algorithms, social media would be more alike search engines or online forums, which are entirely different corners of the internet. Those algorithms do not only rule over what users see, they shape the manner in which communication can happen on the platforms and influence the type of content which is being shared. For instance, Tiktok users are aware of the fact that the platform's algorithm is more likely to prioritize certain videos over others.[2] Once they figure it out, users tend to share those tips with one another, resulting in a standardisation of the content which is being published in the hope that said content will gain more attention (Seabrook, 2022). This is the reason why a lot of TikTok videos contain music

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[2] See, for instance : https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMYFX8JNb/ ; https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMYFXJrAC/

and dancing despite not being about either, regardless of whether the aim is to be educational or to rant about a societal issue: the user is more likely to attract attention if they sing, dance or add music to their video.

- Lastly, what I explicitly exclude by way of this focus on algorithms is the question of privacy. Indeed, the ownership of one's own data and control over its access can be tied to freedom, and one could reflect on how SNS access, use and share this data with third parties, and on how this theoretically affects our freedom in return. Nevertheless, I believe that narrowing this thesis' focus down to the freedom of users and the manner in which SNS curate information and communication is sufficient and that expanding beyond this question could result in an overly broad analysis.

As such, this chapter will be divided in 4 subsections, each focusing on a specific section of the debate on SNS and harm to freedom. I will begin by addressing the phenomenon of "filter bubbles", which is linked to the manner in which virtually all algorithms function on social media platforms, and which is frequently conceptualized as limiting the freedom of the average SNS user (A). I will continue by discussing the grievances which surround the manipulative and opaque nature which is often thought to characterize those algorithms as well as the manner in which this is taken to endanger the freedom of those who are by default subjected to their curation (B). I will then summarize what freedom as control implies (C). this I will conclude by drawing on examples from the academic philosophical literature, and will address the question of algorithmic governance, i.e. the manner in which SNS reduce users to probabilities and forgo the ambiguity which is inherent to human beings (D & E).

The first half of this analysis will be focused on ideas which tend to equate freedom with control, and the second half will shift towards an idea which equate freedom with power.

A) Freedom as control

A threat to freedom: filter bubbles

One of the questions which I have come across the most, both in the mainstream and academic literature, is the nature of the algorithms used by social media platforms and the almost inevitable creation of "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2012) which results from the manner in which they are designed. Filter bubbles create unique universes of information which confine users to content similar to that with what they have engaged with in the past,[3] thus limiting discovery (Zimmer, 2019). The term bubble consequently aims at emphasizing the fact that users are isolated by their own preferences and invited to repeat behaviours which do not promote confrontation with information that falls outside of an increasingly hermetic scope. SNS implement such personalization algorithms because they successfully increases the time spent on platforms. For instance, users of the platform Tiktok immediately access a "For You Page", which only displays videos which the algorithm estimates will keep them engaged (David, 2019). Similarly, Facebook users are not indiscriminately shown all of their friends' content but instead access a feed which has been curated by the platform's algorithm according to what is most likely to retain their attention (Meta, 2023).

An easy way to grasp the concept of filter bubbles is to think in terms of a political spectrum ranging from left to right: a user on the far-right end of the spectrum is going to be validated in their own perspective as their information diet will contain more content from other far-right users. If they are exposed to views from the far-left of the spectrum, it is unlikely to be without some critical mediation, e.g. a far-right user reposting said far-left content so as to argue against it. Unsurprisingly, this is often taken to be a problem which affects the freedom of SNS users and democracy at large (Overgaard & Wooley, 2022). Indeed, if users are not exposed to an accurate representation of the world, one which contains views from the far-right, the far-left and everything in between, they are by nature subjected to a form of limitation which they can hardly counter-act.[4]

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[3] That is based on the assumption that past behaviour is a reliable indicator of future behaviour.

[4] This cannot be compared to censorship, for algorithms need not specifically push a specific view or agenda forward and eliminate the rest, but de facto, what the user is left with is an inaccurate/incomplete representation of the world.

Freedom and informational manipulation can be taken to be mutually exclusive if we think that freedom implies the ability to make informed decisions which are not disproportionately affected by the interests of others, particularly if those interests are financial in nature.[5] For instance, Forbes journalist John Koetsier assimilates the Tiktok algorithm to "digital crack" (2020), putting an emphasis on the addictive nature of a vision of the world curated to our preferred perspective. Indeed, Koetser makes clear that alike a transaction between a dealer and an addict, the interests of Tiktok and the interests of Tiktok users do not align. Tiktok users may have an interest in being entertained, but this is not proportionate to the time spent on the platform. Whilst Tiktok has an interest in users spending as much time as possible scrolling and seeing ads, that is not true of the users themselves: they would not derive more value from the app should they spend hours more on it daily. It could of course be argued that regardless of the question of time, entertainment and enjoyment of the platforms is contingent to only seeing people who are like ourselves. Perhaps a queer person enjoys being in a filter bubble where everybody else is queer, perhaps this is a safe space. This may be true, but it is possible to argue that freedom is enabled (by having a space to see people who look like us) as much as it is harmed (we become entrapped into a vision of ourselves). After all, queerness on social media is curated and delimitated too. However liberating, one's experience on social media could still be harmful to their freedom: like the people trapped in Plato's cave, what they see is a reflection of what reality truly is (Eyer, 2016).

Philosopher James Williams argues that the addictive and limiting design of SNS is dangerous for freedom as users' desires, selves and goals gradually change as a result of the particular vision of the world which they are exposed to and which is reinforced every time they log in, without necessarily realizing it (2018).[6] Personalized algorithms need not leave room for randomness: the more serendipity is left possible, the more risks the algorithms would be taking with users' attention, and so, familiarity always prevails over discovery. In that sense, the grievance against filter bubbles resides in the loss of opportunity to see more and ultimately, to be more (Williams, 2018). This vision is contingent to the understanding that SNS are becoming a more frequent and most importantly, more exclusive source of

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[5] By financial interest, I mean that the SNS which I am focusing on do not make users pay to subscribe to their services and operate according to a business model which relies on the monetization of attention via advertising. SNS have a clear financial interest in preserving attention to increase engagement and time spent on their platforms, and this is where many authors see an issue for freedom

[6] Again, abiding by that logic, the queer social media user's freedom to be themselves could actually be negatively affected insofar as they are only exposed to a certain vision of queerness, that which SNS bring forward.

information for users, meaning that an increasingly high share of SNS users regard SNS as an important or even unique source of information or entertainment (Shearer and Mitchell, 2021; Westerman et al, 2013).

I do not believe that the vision of freedom which underlies this line of argumentation and the way in which it is harmed is at all flawed, but it can be circular insofar as it brings one back to a binary understanding of the forces at play, with powerless users falling victim to powerful social media algorithms. This perspective does not imply that users do not know about the existence or effect of filter bubbles, it is in fact a rather well-known phenomenon, but it does not account for why users accept to be manipulated in such a manner, or for what being free on SNS would look like. Indeed, the pitfall of the argument that filter bubbles are a problem to freedom is the objection according to which users are free to want to be entertained, to want their information to be curated to their liking. It could be argued that SNS users are free to consider algorithmic curation a part of the terms and conditions of a product they want to use anyway. I believe that what is needed in response to such an objection is a way to think about this problem as being both the result of the design of SNS and users' attraction to a closed, determined world; In criticizing filter bubbles as something which is "hijacking our brains" and from which we must free ourselves, we may not put enough emphasis on the fact that this is something which we may sometimes be wanting. So although I agree that the problem of filter bubbles is substantial and harmful to our freedom, I believe that freedom needs to be looked at differently so that we can think of different solutions.

Before diving into the added-value of the existentialist framework, I will continue reviewing the existing debate on SNS and freedom. The question of filter bubbles is connected but not exclusive to the question of the manipulation of users, and I will now shift my focus towards the voluntary manipulation of users (rather than incidental) by SNS and the issues which have been raised with regard to freedom.

A threat to freedom: manipulation and opacity

As opposed to the personalization algorithms which are commonly used on the web for mercantile purposes,[7] those which are designed for SNS do not exclusively curate content according to what is likely to elicit a positive response (enjoyment, purchase), but around what is likely to retain attention, be it good or bad.[8] As such, those algorithms are at times accused of manipulating users' emotions independently from their wellbeing. Whilst this can remain accidental, concerns have been raised in connection to instances in which social media platforms voluntarily manipulated users' emotions to obtain certain results. Indeed, some platforms have shown their willingness to harness their influence on their users' emotions and behaviour for further financial gain. Take for instance the case of the infamous study undertaken by Facebook over its own users in 2014: the platform created outrage when it revealed that it has been manipulating the feed of hundreds of thousands of users to see whether or not they could influence their mood, both positively and negatively (Booth, 2014).

More recently, Tiktok users and journalists have speculated over the existence of a "heating" button on the platforms which allows Tiktok employees to manually make a video go viral (Baker-White, 2023). Such a functionality has allegedly been used to attract influencers and brands to the platform. Stanford Law School Professor Evelyn Douek explains that although we think that SNS are democratic in that they give the same platform to all, this is inaccurate insofar as "the same old power structures are replicating in social media as well, where the platform can decide winners and losers to some degree, and commercial and other kinds of partnerships take advantage" (Baker-White, 2023). As such, the platform Tiktok can decide to push content based on the brands with which they want to work with and label it as "for you", letting users believe that X brand offers something that is just like them, just what they need.

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[7] Think, for instance, of Amazon recommending products based on browsing preferences.

[8] Human attention is drawn to that which provokes strong emotional responses (Schreiner et al, 2021), which needs not necessarily be pleasant: users respond intensely to content which causes fear or outrage. As a consequence, and unlike mercantile or streaming websites, the curation operated by algorithms on SNS platforms is unlikely to only display content which the user interacts with for positive reasons. The nature of social media platforms allows for such a curation: if a user has interacted with posts relating to X interest (say, a particular TV show or political party), the algorithm is going to assume that more of the same content will keep the user interacting (Pariser, 2012). By virtue of said content being familiar to the user, this is likely to prove true. However, the same user will also be considered to be interested in posts similar to those which previously elicited a negative response so strong that they led to interaction (the user clicking on a news article about a tragic event or responding to a provocative post from a political opponent, for instance). The relevant metric is the user's attention and not their financial resources -not directly, that is. As such, purchase intent is not of prime relevance and the user's experience does not need to be positive or fruitful in any way: it just needs to be as long as possible (Atler, 2018).

Naturally, such large-scaled manipulation practices, or the mere possibility thereof, raise concerns for freedom. This is particularly straightforward when one considers the negative impact on wellbeing which SNS are susceptible to have: surely, if users kept their freedom on SNS, they would not choose to feel bad. Whilst this depends on a somewhat hedonistic conception of what people want, this rests on a fairly common assumption about freedom, which is tied to control, to the ability to make choices which are good (or at least feel good) for us. I believe that this shows a gap in the reasoning which we usually apply to freedom: even though we know about filter bubbles, and even though we know about cases like Cambridge Analytica, we still use social media. So, is it that its appeal is worth surrendering a little bit of our sacred freedom to corporations who do not have our best interest in mind? Or is it that we do not sufficiently understand the extent of the harm?

I will now discuss the part of the debate which focuses on the opacity of SNS manipulation as a danger for freedom. Indeed, that we lack a sufficiently developed understanding of the manner in which we are affected is a good explanation as to why we keep using social media and how our freedom is being harmed. Although users commonly understand the concept of filter bubbles and have heard of cases like Cambridge Analytica, they tend to have very little understanding of how, exactly, their experience is curated (Morris, 2015). If users do not know what is happening to them, it is difficult to argue that they can exercise their freedom and make informed choices, such as the choice to use SNS. In the absence of algorithm literacy, meaning the possibility for users to "test the contours of their own filter bubble" and understand how it affects their digital experience, it is assumed that users lack the self-awareness necessary to exercise autonomy in the digital world (Milan & Agosti, 2019). This raises concerns about the harm which can be done to a user without them being able to have sufficient control over what they see to prevent it. Ranging from users with eating disorders who cannot recover whilst using SNS to users who are drawn into arguments every time they use social media, the narrative according to which we need to "break free" from SNS does find its source in a viable line of argumentation.

However, I believe that many of us would still use SNS if we had a better understanding of how it curates our feeds. As such, I believe that we are headed the wrong way when thinking of solutions that can help us "break free" from social media when it seems that we quite

willingly surrender our freedom to it. I note that the manner in which we commonly talk about freedom and SNS systematically circles back to a vision of freedom which amounts to being in control, and I think that this is a part of the problem. Although we do describe our relationship to SNS as sometimes addictive,[9] or leaving us inconvenienced with a self-perceived lack of control over our own behaviour (Du, 2018), we do keep a sufficient level of control.

Conclusion

In conclusion and as argued, I believe that conceptualizing harm to freedom as a problem primarily related to control, to users not being able to choose what they see and how they feel, invites one to consider one-dimensional solutions (i.e. do not use social media). I assume that I have encountered this thought pattern this frequently because it is rather instinctive: defining freedom as being somewhat in control of oneself makes sense with regard to the way we navigate our daily lives: we tend to feel ourselves not free when we cannot choose, cannot control what happens to us, and on the contrary, tend to feel ourselves free when we are not pressured by external factors or actors. However, and again, this seems to be putting a lot of responsibility on the user to preserve their own freedom. Of course, it can be counter-argued that SNS actually do share this responsibility with users and that they can design their platforms so as to give control back to users, or at the very least, stop engaging in manipulative practices. This is valid, but I believe that this can be exploited by SNS insofar as they already provide some level of control to users, who can choose who they follow, who they block and who or what they engage with.

All in all, I believe that framing harm to freedom as an issue which relates to control or the lack thereof is not satisfying and that we need to ensure that our ethical reflection on technology evolves with it. This way of thinking (freedom as control) equates social media to something the like of alcohol: for drinking clouds one's self-control and ability to make decisions, it can be said that we only are in control of the first few drinks that we consume. After this, we cannot exercise the same amount of control. Reflecting about social media and freedom in those terms amounts to a similar reasoning: we are only in charge of the initial

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[9] The symbiotic relationship between control and freedom can be observed when the question of SNS addiction is discussed: SNS addiction is more and more frequently observed amongst a number of users and is assumed to result from the "increasingly aggressive" design (i.e. effective at overriding the user's desire to stop) of most platforms (Atler, 2018; Wu, 2016; Timely, 2020).

decision to use social media, but cannot exercise the same amount on control once we are actually using it. Just like it is generally believed that we are responsible for our own alcohol consumption, equating freedom to control on social media is likely to lead us towards a one-sided responsibility biased towards the users. Indeed, alcohol brands are not taken to be specifically ethical actors, but they need not be when the burden of control is shifted to the consumers. Responsibility, in this instance, has also shifted from the brands to the regulators, and it is the law which is expected to provide some safeguards for consumers.[10] As true as it may be that SNS need to be regulated as such, this can be challenging[11] and should not be a way to escape from platform responsibility.

Some choose not to put assign any responsibility to users for they do not believe that the digital ecosystem can easily be escaped. This is the case of the philosophical perspective which I will now discuss: the concept of algorithmic governance, which moves on from the idea of freedom as control to propose the idea of freedom as power.

B) Freedom as power

A threat to freedom: reduction to a statistical alter-ego

This section will address the work of philosophers Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns, who discuss harm to freedom with view of the disempowerment of SNS users. Rouvroy and Berns, are beginning their analysis from a familiar point: the question of the users' loss of control over their online experience, they then lead their readers to the idea of disempowerment, of lack of freedom as lack of power. The difference which I perceive between this conception and the conception of freedom as control is that the question of power leads one to the other side of the balance, meaning that by virtue of equal opposite reactions, if a side is disempowered, the other side is empowered. This fosters a way of thinking which looks for solutions on the side of SNS rather than only on the side of users.

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[10] That is, when they do not have the initial level of control required to start drinking at all. One of the rationale behind the prohibition of alcohol under the age of 18 is that younger people cannot exercise the right level of control.

[11] The law notoriously takes a lot of time to catch up with technology, and it will be complicated to find tangible legal bases given that harm to freedom on social media is nowhere near as clear as harm to public health with alcohol.

The point of departure of Rouvroy and Berns is the following: in order to predict future behaviours and to curate content accordingly, algorithms create profiles of the individuals whose attention they are designed to retain (Rouvroy & Berns, 2010). Each of a user's actions on the web contributes to the creation of such a profile. Although derived from and attached to the user, this profile cannot be considered identical to the organic human being which it represents: it is an online alter ego which is based on a computerized understanding of human identity and leaves no room for ambiguity or unpredictability (Rouvroy & Berns, 2010). This is a threat insofar as it can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Pariser explains that in terms of "self-fulfilling identities, in which the Internet's distorted picture of us becomes who we really are" (2012). By mediating every online experience in a world where being online is a significant part of one's day, digital alter egos are taken to endanger the possibility to be something other than who the computer thinks we are. This proposes a perception of freedom as possibility rather than actuality: it is about what we could be. The ethical problem which is underlined here cannot be solved by the users alone for Rouvroy and Berns apply this reasoning to the digital society at large rather than just to SNS (this means that what is being discussed is essentially an environment which users cannot escape), and make clear that a share of the population benefits from and fosters this algorithmic system where most are disempowered. I will now dive further into this algorithmic governance theory so as to be able to understand how it perceives harm to freedom in a context which focuses on power, and the kind of solutions which it proposes as a result.

Proponents of the algorithmic governmentality theory often use the term of "algorithmic prison" (de la Porte, 2014), drawing an analogy between the physical restriction of freedom to which inmates are subjected and the restriction of possibilities in the virtual space to which most internet users are subjected.[12] In this instance, the effects of such a limitation do not apply to the human body, but to human behaviour (de la Porte, 2014). Indeed, it is argued that algorithms regulate behaviours in a way that reduces leeway (Berns & Rouvroy, 2014). As explained, a user's digital alter ego can merely be an ensemble of data which computer systems were able to comprehend. It is as such assumed that one's future is impacted because the online world is curated for some aspects of the self only: left behind is every part of the

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[12] Most evidently, it is not relevant to compare these situations in terms of human suffering, and the analogy should merely be drawn in connection to a limitation of one's possibilities imposed by external factors.

self which could not be "processed" by algorithms for there is no way to 'calculate' open-ended possibilities, other than those which logically follow from current behaviour.[13]

Rouvroy and Berns (2010)'s concern relates to the power redistribution which algorithms enable: those who design, understand and benefit from their operation are empowered (e.g. they have a unilateral epistemic advantage over others), whilst those whose data is being processed so as to create a digital alter ego tend to be robbed of possibilities in ways which they mostly neither perceive nor comprehend. As such, they highlight that freedom is not only threatened by the lack of control users have over their experience, but by the fact that they are at the mercy of those with power over this experience. Indeed, it is people who design and implement those algorithms, and even though those people do not decide on the manner in which those algorithms affect specific individuals, they still have power over them insofar as they decide how decisions will be made. On SNS, a "decision" may pertain to the links on which a user will click, the content they will read or the individuals with whom they will engage. That is not to say that the people who design SNS algorithms are gaining the freedom which SNS users are losing, but simply that with this perspective, harm to freedom is clearly being caused by others. This perspective invites one to think of this problem as people affecting people rather than a technology versus its users. I believe that in this regard, this framework is more likely to yield useful solutions which do not pit humans against algorithms.

This perspective is considerably closer to the point I intend of making by using the framework of existentialist ethics since it is focused on possibility rather than actuality, and I believe that it could bring about interesting solutions. Nevertheless, its main idea of what freedom means remains connected to the capability of thinking, acting and choosing on one's own terms without the constraints of others. This perspective thus conceptualizes freedom as something which, not unlike a commodity, can be had or not had, can be stolen or retrieved. Harm to freedom, here, mostly resides in this idea of unfair distribution, with some people being robbed of choice whilst others are empowered with it. Although I find this way of thinking preferable to one dimensional perspectives which focus on self-control, it is still subject to the limitations of a conception which commodifies freedom.

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[13] By operating in terms of predictability, curation algorithms develop what may be referred to as a "memory of the future" (Rouvroy, 2013). This memory of the future confronts users with a limited number of possibilities put forward by algorithms which are sufficiently averse to randomness to effectively guarantee that in a lot of cases, the user's next decision will have been predicted.

C) The gap in in the debate on SNS and harm to freedom

The samples of the philosophical and mainstream discussions on SNS and freedom which I have presented focus on freedom as analogous to control, autonomy and agency. The freedom of SNS users is framed as something desirable which is being taken away by technologies or by those who design them. This corresponds to a rather common perception of freedom, which is something that a person can have or not have, and that is reduced the less control and choice that person has over something.

I have argued that thinking of freedom in such a way promotes binary or circular solutions to the finding that SNS causes harm to freedom. The point of this thesis is to show that the debate could benefit in a different perception of freedom. Indeed, the perception of freedom which appears dominant here leaves room for objections which SNS can exploit as a matter of justification. It can be easy to arrive at the conclusion that it is up to people not to open Pandora's box, not to sign up for SNS, or that users should try to keep their following broad and their engagement diverse. Indeed, to the idea that curation algorithms are ethically problematic, one could oppose the idea that being free means being able to do what we want. Indeed, it could be said that users maintain control over their behaviour on SNS as they are influenced but not forced into decisions, and that in any case, they maintain control over the most important decision: to use SNS in the first place. In attempting to reflect on freedom in terms of "being in control" or not, seeking hints which may indicate that freedom is negatively impacted means looking for situations in which SNS take control away from people. In that case, it is always possible to argue that SNS are merely a catalyst for existing tendencies, an instrument to indulge in behaviours which would have been displayed anyways. It is effectively difficult to know to which extent algorithms override or amplify the tendencies which a user would have displayed otherwise.

It is additionally easy to arrive at the conclusion that SNS should simply get rid of personalized curation. Whilst all of this may be true and a part of the desirable solution, I believe that taking a step back from our pre-conceptions, particularly that of what freedom means, may help in trying to gain a better understanding of our relationship to SNS and thus, of the problem(s) which we are trying to solve. The case for the added value of a new framework will be made

throughout the rest of this thesis, which will introduce existentialist ethics in depth before applying it to SNS and drawing conclusions.

Chapter II – The Added value of a new framework

This thesis proposes to look into the question of SNS's impact on freedom from a different philosophical angle, that of existentialist ethics.

What is existentialist ethics?

A) Introducing existentialist ethics

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who lived in the 19th century, is often considered to be the first existentialist. In response to philosophical attempts at explaining the world in terms of a comprehensive system, Kierkegaard sought to make clear that the human world can hardly be understood in terms of an abstract order and argued, on the contrary, that human existence is fortuitous and cannot be encompassed with the traditional conception of freedom (1844). Kierkegaard explained that men are fundamentally free to choose for themselves and that no essence, cause or overarching value system pre-exists or trumps this freedom (1844). As such, freedom is not equated to something that can be had or not had, or to something desirable insofar as it can be equated to being in control, but to an inescapable open-endedness which inevitably generates anxiety. Kierkegaard's work was dedicated to proving the ultimate relevance of God and faith, which he took to be that towards which man must direct his existence. To Kierkegaard, giving in to faith did not amount to getting rid of one's freedom or anxiety, both inescapable, but simply to live a more authentic life, unridden by the fortuitous and superficial attitudes which many adopt as a way to deny their freedom (1849). As such, the philosophical doctrine of existentialism is based on the idea that for man, existence comes first and is not preceded by purpose or any sort of direction. It is based on the idea that being free is not a goal but a starting point.

Although Kierkegaard ultimately aims at demonstrating that facing up to this condition without deceiving oneself implies a certain relationship with faith, further proponents of

existentialism let go of this religious dimension. Atheist existentialism departs from the same finding (that existence precedes essence and that in the absence of overbearing system or values, man is frighteningly free) but it goes beyond Kierkegaard's perspective insofar as the existence of God is ruled out and humanity is taken to be completely on its own.

Drawing on Kierkegaard and on German philosophy,[14] 20th century French philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre are notorious representatives of the atheist branch of existentialism. Largely influenced by the events of the second world war and the post-war political and social context in France, in Europe and in the world, de Beauvoir and Sartre principally developed the secular form of the doctrine via essays, articles and works of fiction. Although dominantly ontological (pertaining to what is), existentialism bears an ethical dimension (pertaining to what should be) which de Beauvoir coined in her 1947 essay 'The Ethics of Ambiguity'.

To the French existentialists, the absence of God does not entail the absence of preferable ways of living or of a sense of morality. The role that humanity gave to God has simply been delegated back to humanity itself, meaning that freedom entails responsibility, and not the lack thereof (de Beauvoir, 1947). De Beauvoir seeks to demonstrate that freedom is at the heart of what could be considered an ethical attitude, and that it is only by acknowledging one's freedom and that of others (and by acting accordingly) that one can live authentically (1947). In other words, denying the complete gratuity of human existence and the responsibility that mankind, and more precisely each of its individual representatives, consequently has vis-à-vis itself amounts to living in bad faith. For mankind is on its own, and for each man acts on its behalf, each action is definitive and absolute (1947), what humans want and do is their reality, there is no additional layer of complexity, no third party. Morality is not external to mankind and can only come from it. There are, of course, limits to freedom. It is fundamental but coexists with finitude and facticity, that is, with physical and man-made boundaries. This is the ambiguity which de Beauvoir points at: humans are subjects and objects navigating freedom and facticity, they exist and think as individuals amongst a multitude of others who do the same, they are torn between infinitude (open ended freedom) and finitude (death).

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[14] Such as the work of Hegel or Heidegger.

B) The relevance of existentialist ethics to reflect on SNS and freedom

So, how can existentialist ethics shed a new light on the topic of freedom and social media?

It must be understood that existentialism does not offer an ethical framework *per se*, and does not provide guidance, neither in the form of a set of rules nor in particular cases. It does not aspire to bring about a conception of what is right or wrong. In his 1945 lecture titled 'Existentialism is a Humanism', Sartre made clear that overly abstract principles fail to inspire action and are pointless insofar as concrete situations are unique and cannot be predicted. As such, I do not believe that the existentialist perspective could be used as a basis to affirm, for instance, that social media is altogether good or bad. In spite of the absence of moral guidance, the existentialist doctrine allows for an ethical assessment of human attitudes in relation to freedom: those who refuse the gratuity of their existence and deny their freedom and/or that of others are thought to be living in "bad faith" (de Beauvoir, 1947). Because De Beauvoir conceptualizes authentic freedom and the attitude(s) which relate to it, she makes it possible to confront the existentialist doctrine to specific technology uses, both to find harm and to find potential for improvement.

It is principally in this manner that the existentialist conceptualization of freedom can prove useful to reflect on the effects of social media on users and society. The attitudes which the design of social media platforms strongly incentivize can be confronted to the ideas of authenticity and genuine freedom. As such, and additionally, what is *prima facie* considered to be promoting freedom (such as the fact that social media allows one to be connected to the entire world, or the fact that it enables a new form of activism) can be analysed in relation to de Beauvoir's idea of freedom. This helps shift the focus towards an open ended question: instead of wondering whether or not we are free, existentialism encourages us to think about what freedom means. As such and for example, instead of asking whether filter bubbles curtail the freedom of SNS users, we are drawn to think about the reason why we created technologies which perpetuate filter bubbles and the reason why we tolerate them. That is not to bluntly say that the blame is shared, that both SNS and SNS users are responsible for

neglecting freedom, but it is necessary not to separate SNS and SNS users into two distinct categories, as if they were the oppressor and the oppressed.

In the Ethics of Ambiguity, de Beauvoir describes a series of day-to-day behaviours corresponding to different ways of living inauthentically, that is, without acknowledging and acting in accordance with one's freedom and that of others. Those patterns are common to those who seek to escape their freedom and roughly fall into five different categories which de Beauvoir personifies into five different profiles. Each of these profiles fails, to various degrees, to meet the existentialist standards for what it means to be human. To be human should entail responsibility, which is lacking when one hides behind facticity and/or neglects their interdependence with others.

Before diving into the interaction between freedom and SNS, I will as such lay out the framework developed by Simone de Beauvoir with more precision and will introduce each of the "profiles" she drew to apply her ethics to everyday life. This will help point at what existentialists could mean by harm to freedom (and by whom this harm is caused).

What does existentialist ethics consider to be detrimental to freedom?

Given the differences between the existentialist conception of freedom and a more colloquial understanding, it is necessary to (re)define what is meant by harm. By all means, the existentialists do not consider that freedom can be had or not had, and instead focus on whether it is acknowledged and exercised. As such, one of the primary ways in which de Beauvoir considers that freedom is being undermined is when it is not at all acknowledged.

Note that in this section, I will abstain from discussing SNS and will try to coin the specificity of the existentialist understanding of harm in order to subsequently apply it to technology.

C) Existentialist ethics and harm to freedom

The harm of living without acknowledging freedom:

De Beauvoir begins her list of unethical attitudes towards freedom by providing the portrait of a character whom she calls the "sub-man".[15] The sub-man seems to renounce to being human (so, to being free) by way of adopting a child-like (i.e. ignorant and devoid of responsibility) stance towards the world (1947; p48). De Beauvoir explains that:

"*This apathy manifests a fundamental fear in the face of existence, in the face of the risks and tensions which it implies. The sub-man rejects [...] his human condition[...]. Such a choice immediately confirms itself. He discovers around him only an insignificant and dull world. [...] The less he exists, the less there is reason for him to exist, since these reasons are created only by existing*" (de Beauvoir, 1947, p56).[16]

De Beauvoir makes clear that the failure of the sub-man to live authentically stems from a paralysis in the face of the ambiguity of the human condition, that is, the fact that all possibilities are always open and that each and every action is a choice. Torn between their fundamental freedom and the limitations inherent to human life (e.g. death), sub-men choose not to choose. That every choice is definitive, and that there is no way of knowing what the "right" choice is (that there is, in fact, no right choice), is paralyzing. As such, de Beauvoir describes characters who delegate this responsibility to others and as a result, live within facticity, meaning that they take arbitrary limits to be absolute and find solace in the "serious" world (1947, p60). They do not display interest or concern in possibilities other than those which are given to them by third-parties.

Note that many of the individuals whose attitude corresponds to that of the sub-men are individuals who have no means of acknowledging their freedom because others are forcing a

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[15] Note that this should not be understood as individuals who are not human or should not be treated as such. By all means, those who fall under the category of sub-men are human beings and worthy of the same respect as others, they simply fail to act authentically to such an extent that they are as remote as could be from the existentialist understanding of what being human means.

[16] « *Cette apathie manifeste une peur fondamentale devant l'existence, devant les risques et la tension qu'elle implique [...] par là c'est l'existence même qu'il refuse. Un tel choix se confirme aussitôt de lui-même. [...] Moins il existe, moins il y a pour lui de raison d'exister, puisque ces raisons ne se créent qu'en existant. [...] Il réduit à néant le sens de son dépassement par l'incohérence de ses projets, ses caprices désordonnés ou son indifférence ; ses actes ne sont jamais des choix positifs : seulement des fuites.* ».

vision of the world upon them. Indeed, it is often by others than people are "maintained in a state of servitude and ignorance" and are forced to exercise their freedom within universes constituted "before them, without them" (1947, p51). Because they are still treated like children, those individuals have no means of knowing, no means of escaping the systems in which others maintain them. As such, those are people who do not live authentically but are not responsible for their error.[17] De Beauvoir makes clear, however, that as soon as liberation becomes a possibility, staying in one's position becomes "bad faith, a positive error" (1947, p51).

Let us think, for the sake of illustration, about the situation of women in western countries. For a large share of recent history, the majority of women were maintained in a state of servitude or at the very least, ignorance. Having access to neither education nor financial independence, women were expected to live a certain way and were faced with a number of impossibilities: they lived in someone else's (serious) world. They, themselves, needed not necessarily understand and adopt the serious values constituting such a serious world. De Beauvoir explains that they were not expected to. Just like children, they were primarily expected to do as they were told, regardless of whether or not they agreed or understood (1949). The boundaries of such a serious world hardly allow for means of attack (1947, p51), neither in thoughts nor actions. As such, the behaviour of women living in oppressive eras may very well have fallen into the scope of the behaviour of the sub-men. However inauthentic an existence this constitutes, this must nevertheless not be understood as an error for which women were responsible: bad faith supposes a certain degree of awareness which oppression does not allow (1947, p51).[18]

It is when women's situation changed that continuing to abide by and uphold the values of this serious world became a positive error according to de Beauvoir. That is, once women could fight for and obtain rights, once the possibility of liberation became tangible, the grasp of ignorance receded and living as per the expectation of the serious world became, in a way, a choice. Of course, de Beauvoir does not intend to say that any woman abiding by the

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[17] « l'ignorance, l'erreur sont des faits aussi inéluctables que les murs d'une prison ; l'esclave, la musulmane enfermée, n'ont aucun instrument qui leur permette d'attaquer, ne serais ce qu'en pensée, par l'étonnement, la colère, la civilisation qui les opprime » (1947).
[18] It is once more worth bearing in mind that the term "sub-man", however misleading, does not entail inferiority but merely a degree of separation from authenticity. A life led inauthentically is not a life which is qualitatively inferior, and it is important to separate the existentialist aspiration towards authenticity from the value of a human life.

conservative expectations of her family or partner in an era where she is no longer kept ignorant is living wrongly. Many are coerced or otherwise in danger, and many simply do not see any other viable option, for one's perception of actual possibility can never be as broad as the existentialist view on open-ended possibility. De Beauvoir does not condemn the behaviour of the mother who treats her son and daughter differently, who raises her daughter the same way she was raised, thus perpetuating the cycle which socially constructs women as per arbitrary expectations (1975). That this does not have to be this way is neither easy to grasp nor to act upon, and opposing forces (i.e. the pressure of men) constitute a substantial obstacle in the way of other possibilities or awareness thereof. Living authentically or inauthentically cannot be reduced to living rightly or wrongly, and existentialists insist on the uniqueness of each and every situation.

It must be understood that de Beauvoir grounds her judgment of the attitude of the sub-men in her own experience. Indeed, the journals which she rigorously maintained during her youth hint at the fact that she may herself have felt like the serious world in which she was brought up could not be overcome. She wrote, aged 18: "I barely choose myself, life imposes itself to me, my life to which I suppose I must resign myself" (1926, p171).[19] She quickly decided not to stick to this sentiment for she soon concluded that she would only look up to "those who think their lives: not only those who think, nor only those who live" (1926, p173).[20] Those who only live are those who she indeed later described as the sub-men. Stuck in an infantile state, they do not think about the boundaries of their world, either because they cannot (ignorance imposed onto oneself by others) or because they do not want to (for comfort or fear). Accepting one's role in a pre-established order needs not be the result of oppression, it may as well be that which is "comfortable enough". If "a choice is never made, but always is in the making, repeating itself every time I become aware of it", the actual self has no right to decide on behalf of the future self (1927, p331),[21] rendering many decisions (in de Beauvoir's opinion, mostly marriage) unviable. As such, not thinking for oneself, or preventing others from doing so, is harming freedom.

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[19] « Moi-même comme je choisis peu, comme la vie s'impose à moi, ma vie à laquelle il faut bien enfin que je me résigne ».

[20] « Les êtres qui pensent leur vie : pas seulement ceux qui pensent, ni ceux seulement qui vivent ».

[21] « Un choix n'était jamais fait, mais toujours se faisait, il se répète chaque fois que j'en prend conscience. Comment le moi d'aujourd'hui peut-il décider pour le moi de demain ? ».

What then, can be qualified of harm to freedom? Well, in the case of the sub-man, I believe that harm can be identified in two ways:

- Firstly, those who maintain others in such a state of servitude that they cannot acknowledge their own freedom can be considered to be acting unethically, to be harming said freedom. Indeed, those who are kept in ignorance can neither perceive nor realize their freedom, which is a loss for the entirety mankind given that each and every individual is its representative. Additionally, one's own freedom is entirely dependent on the freedom of others, and creating or fostering a system which oppresses others means that the oppressor is neglecting his own freedom, too.

- Then, those who are not acknowledging their freedom even though they are not stuck in an oppressive system can also be considered to be harming freedom: their own, but also that of the others they do not help. In this sense, harm to freedom can be self-inflicted. By refusing to exercise their freedom, sub-men are harming the freedom of all, they perpetuate the systems which they blindly abide by.

  De Beauvoir makes clear that she considers this attitude to be dangerous to freedom particularly in that regard: indifference cannot trump existence, and the energy of those people must be redirected towards something. De Beauvoir calls this a "blind force" (1947, p58). Given visions of the world require support in order to gain advantage over other visions of the world. Such support can be obtained amongst sub-men, whose "inert resistance" can be used to one man's advantage and opposed to other men. This is why de Beauvoir describes sub-men as easily drawn by "anti" and "pro" movements (1947, p58). The sub-men, like children who sometimes take answers to their questions to be absolute, are dangerous, particularly en masse, when they take beliefs such as "X people are the cause of this country's problem", "Y people are less human" to be facts and consequently feel justified in partaking in violent action (1947, p58). Historically, such beliefs are indeed bound to appear increasingly factual as the actions of the oppressors make it so: as de Beauvoir for instance explains about women "It is not the inferiority of women which determined their historical insignificance: it is their historical insignificance which bound them to inferiority" (1949, p226).

JANUARY 6 COMMITTEE VIDEO

The January 6th Hearings

>> WE ARE GOING TO WALK DOWN TO THE CAPITOL

PBS NEWS HOUR

#PBSNEWS 0:47 / 1:42

C-SPAN c-span.org

PBS est une chaîne du service public américain. Wikipedia ☑

WATCH: 'Trump asked us to come,' rioters said during Jan. 6 attack | Jan. 6 hearings

1

I was invited here by the president.

2

Day of Rage: How Trump Supporters Took the U.S. Capitol | Visual Investigations

So, how does this perspective on freedom differ from a more colloquial understanding? The instance of the sub-man makes clear about existentialism that it does not consider that

freedom is something which we necessarily want. We may think that it is the case, but what the existentialists consider to be freedom is something which we already have, and in many cases, are trying to hide from. Indeed, de Beauvoir explains that it is because we are petrified by freedom that we sometimes refuse to make choices. This brings us to the next divergence with the colloquial view on freedom, which is that freedom is not taken to mean doing "doing what we want" in the sense of acting upon our desires. Indeed, de Beauvoir explains with the sub-man that realizing one's freedom implies thinking rather than merely wanting. If freedom meant being able to act upon desires, then the sub-men would have nothing to be afraid of.

The harm of living in bad faith

De Beauvoir follows her description of the sub-man by an analysis of the behaviour of a character whom she calls the serious man. She explains that some people, in order not to face open-ended possibility, decide to erase themselves behind given ends. They adopt a system or an identity which allows them not to have to perpetually make and renew choices. However, instead of merely hiding their indifference, they positively engage with said ends, which they choose to consider as absolute.

"*[The serious man] strives to engulf his freedom in the content that he accepts from society, he loses himself in the object in order to annihilate his subjectivity […] the most radical affirmation of subjectivity: believing for believing, wanting for wanting, is to realize one's freedom in the empty and absurd form of freedom of indifference*" (De Beauvoir, 1947, p60).[22]

It is because they have a vague understanding of their freedom and choose to deny it that serious men act in bad faith. Unlike sub-men, serious men do not blindly follow rules and norms, but perpetuate and enforce them.

If sub-men can cause harm by engaging in violent movements or serving random causes without considering the validity of the ends, serious men are also capable of preventing others

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[22] "Il s'efforce d'engloutir sa liberté dans le contenu que celui-ci accepte de la société, il se perd dans l'objet afin d'anéantir sa subjectivité. L'homme sérieux se pose comme inessentiel en face de l'objet considéré comme essentiel. […] ce qui importe à l'homme sérieux, ce n'est pas tant la nature de l'objet qu'il préfère à lui-même : c'est le fait de pouvoir se perdre en lui. […] affirmation la plus radicale de la subjectivité : croire pour croire, vouloir pour vouloir, c'est réaliser sa liberté sous la forme vide et absurde de liberté d'indifférence ».

from exercising their freedom. Indeed, by acting in bad faith, serious men do not only neglect their own subjectivity and freedom, but that of others, too. De Beauvoir explains that in order to justify the absurdity of their own attitude, serious men are inclined to point at the absurdity of the attitude of other serious men, whose ends differ from theirs (1947, p65). One could think of two opposite political or ideological groups who fight and consider the others' attitude and ideas to be outrageous and senseless. Such a perception of the world is unlikely to yield authenticity for it does not promote (and barely acknowledges) freedom. Instead, it is susceptible to collapse on itself once the serious man realizes that he cannot lose himself in something.

"*The serious man is dangerous; it is natural for him to become a tyrant. Disregarding with bad faith the subjectivity of his choice, he claims that through him the unconditioned value of the object is affirmed; and at the same time he misunderstands the value of subjectivity and the freedom of others*".[23]

The serious attitude can be identified partly because of its resistance to contradictions. The serious man has rendered a cause or object absolute and immutable; in order to uphold this narrative, one must commit logical fallacies, fail to perceive flaws in their reasoning and discard other serious perspectives. In many instances, this means acting upon a conviction at the expense of the freedom of others. Take, for instance, lawmakers and members of the judiciary (in common law countries where judicial decisions set a precedent) whose religious and/or political beliefs guide their decision-making. In their position, such beliefs are not trivial for their decisions can and do change lives. Yet, serious men do not weight their actions in consideration of their impact on the freedom of others or even their own, but merely in consideration of their compatibility with the pursuit of a serious end which they refuse to perceive as subjective and thus impose onto all.[24]

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[23] "L'homme sérieux est dangereux ; il est naturel qu'il se fasse tyran. Méconnaissant avec mauvaise foi la subjectivité de son choix, il prétend qu'à travers lui s'affirme la valeur inconditionnée de l'objet ; et d'un même mouvement il méconnaît la valeur de la subjectivité et de la liberté d'autrui".

[24] In the case of a lawmaker or member of the judiciary, such an attitude could result in a series of decisions which visibly and predictably harm the freedom of others and are logically dubious. Say, for instance, that a decision-maker claims to be defending life at all cost because they believe it to be a value of supreme importance (be it for religious reasons or else). This person may truly believe that they are defending this value, however, the problem of the serious attitude is that in order to pretend that something is absolute in a fortuitous world, one must act in bad faith and at the expense of the serious, subjectivity and freedom of others. This person may as such decide to withdraw a civil right such as abortion in a country which does not have a system which can guarantee that this will not result in increased maternal mortality or precarity. Now,

The problem of the serious man is that, in reducing everything and everyone to whatever is believed to be determined, one is bound to neglect the humanity of others. Indeed, the serious man is not only serious concerning himself (e.g. in thinking that he is a waiter, a professor, a communist, etc), he must also decide what others are or aren't. He is as such capable of arbitrarily placing others in "one dimension of their facticity" such as their gender, religion, nationality, etc (Kirkpatrick, 2020, p237). Take, for instance, the Algerian war. The serious world of the General De Gaulle rested on his vision of the French colonial empire, in which Algeria was French, and its population divided. The humanity of those who were reduced to "Arabs", for instance, was neglected insofar as their freedom and the colonial empire were mutually exclusive. For De Gaulle, it seems that loss of life was thus deemed acceptable in the name of the serious project once said project was threatened. This is a recurring pattern for the serious man, who, throughout history, has waged many wars and cut many lives short to uphold his vision of the world.

Note that the attitude of the serious man needs not always impact others on such a scale. It can simply concern an individual whose identity is so intertwined with their profession that

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it may very well be that this person knows of these consequences but believes that the freedom of fetuses to be born is more important than the freedom of women to have control over their bodies. But suppose that this person upholds not only this, but also decides that the death penalty should remain in place and that citizens should be able to own and carry war weapons in peaceful times. Suppose that it is known, beyond any doubt, that such policies directly result in a substantial increase in the number of deaths every year. This is where the absurdity of the behaviour of the serious men becomes evident: in spite of blatant contradictions (pro-life but not anti-death), one continues to pursue the same ends. It is not life (or freedom) which are being fiercely defended, but life (or freedom) according to, and only to, one serious perspective.

they believe to *be* it. Such a person may feel unhappy, may dislike their day to day life, and yet stay where they are for they have defined themselves as their job. The serious man, in a way, falls into a sort of sum-cost fallacy. In this case, it is mostly their own freedom which is negatively impacted, but it is comparable in that the serious attitude led to a distorted perspective where one's subjectivity is taken to be reality. Of course, this attitude is bound to collapse on itself: however invested in a given project or cause, it is never possible to fully lose oneself into something else, it is never possible to feel whole.

How is this understanding of freedom different? The description of the serious man highlights the self-deceptive nature of human reasoning and demonstrates that we can think ourselves free when we are actually neglecting our freedom. Being free is not understood as being able to do what we want or to be who we want if such a project or identity is taken to be absolute. Additionally, it is made evident that freedom is inter-dependent, we cannot be free in spite of others.

One can spend a lifetime behaving like the serious man, but some may end up exhibiting the same behaviour albeit devoid of the belief that the project or that themselves mean anything. This is another way of displaying bad faith: nihilism.

The harm of living for nothing

The realization that an individual cannot *be* something or that no cause or object taken to be absolute can provide fulfilment can lead them to want to be nothing. Such a desire is still described as substantial insofar as wanting to be *nothing* is still wanting to be *something*. De Beauvoir therefore speaks of a contradictory attitude which perpetually debunks itself (1947, p70). Similarly to the attitudes of the sub-man and the serious man, the attitude of the nihilist brings about the contingency of a negative impact on others insofar as their existence must be rejected too. Indeed, if I try to refute my existence, I must stop acknowledging the existence of others: they could accidentally confirm mine.

Nevertheless, nihilism is described as closer to authenticity than the manner in which the sub-man and the serious-man live their lives, for the nihilist is justified in "thinking that he is

nothing and that the world has no justification" (1947, p73). Indeed, the nihilist does not hide behind facticity. What is taken to be the mistake of the nihilists is simple: they are aware of what is not, but refuse to acknowledge that in response, they ought to create being and to "justify the world" (1947, p73).

"*The fundamental fault of the nihilist is that, rejecting all given values, he does not find, beyond their ruin, the importance of this universal, absolute end, which is freedom itself.* " (1947, p74).

As such, nihilism still alienates freedom. Its lucidity does not result in positive engagement and stops before arriving at the conclusion which the existentialists arrives at, which is that is that in a world with no greater order or sense, humans are both free and responsible.

In her novel "All Men are Mortal", de Beauvoir creates a character whose immortality has precisely resulted in nihilism. The man (Fosca), born in the 13th century, chooses to drink a potion and rapidly comes to regret it once the span of what should have been his lifetime passes and he realizes that he no longer lives in "his time" (1946). Fosca tries, at the beginning, to pursue the ends he had wanted to achieve whilst he was mortal but however successful, he find that is does not bring fulfilment. He then tries to pursue new ends, to explore new places, but soon comes to find that it is in vain: he is bored, does not desire anything anymore. He becomes a witness to history, not according any importance to anything or to himself. He takes part in events merely by accident or out of boredom, always convinced that it does not mean anything at all. The immortal man, it seems, is bound to nihilism and can never live an authentic life: transcending death and facticity is not a viable solution. It is, indeed, a way not to experience the ambiguity which de Beauvoir theorizes. Although unrealistic, the example of Fosca (whose prolonged exposure to history is the reason why he comes to the conclusion that it is fleeting and meaningless) does well in illustrating the nihilistic attitude. Throughout their lifetime, some do, like Fosca, come to stop trying to create meaning. This can be because they have achieved the ends they believed were absolute and did not come to find satisfaction in it (e.g. become rich, become CEO, become a parent) or because they have otherwise acquired the belief that all is vain.

The case of a lawmaker or member of the judiciary can once more be taken to illustrate such a behaviour. Let's suppose that instead of being motivated by beliefs, the lawmaker merely

seeks to earn an ever greater amount of money or support -without ever finding satisfaction in it. Somehow aware of the fact that this pursuit is shallow and will not yield fulfilment or similarly sustainably provide them with something to *be*, let's suppose that the person keeps acting, like the serious men, in a way that proves to be self-contradictory. Because, as opposed to the sub-men, the nihilists once believed in something, this supposition implies that the person chooses not to perceive or care about the contradictions in their actions. Such is the attitude of the nihilist, whose refusal to acknowledge that they are at all responsible can lead to absurdities similar to those of the serious men who constantly re-interpret reality to fit their narrative. This is why the nihilist is described as susceptible to pursue a lost cause whilst fully knowing that it is in fact, lost.

Sarah Huckabee Sanders says children will be 'safe in womb as classroom'

What the profile of the nihilist teaches us about the specificity of the existentialist understanding of freedom is that realizing one's freedom necessarily includes a positive action. Indeed, one cannot just "be free from" something, they must take action. This is precisely why the nihilist's attitude is unethical, although this character theoretically understands his freedom, he does not realize it. This is a key aspect of the existentialist understanding of freedom and its importance will later be discussed in relation to the types of behaviour which SNS incentivize.

De Beauvoir follows her description of nihilism by addressing the instance in which one takes positive action but fails in acting ethically insofar as they do not intend for this positive realization of freedom to be creating value(s). It is existing for its own sake, without sufficiently thinking about the ends pursued.

The harm of existing for nothing

If nihilism is taken to be the rejection of the serious world, the attitude of those who de Beauvoir coins as the adventurers "rejects nihilism via existence itself" (1947, p75), meaning that the choice which is made here is to assume one's subjectivity and freedom. Indeed, the adventurer does not try to be nothing or to escape in the serious world, but instead acts in accordance with his freedom. The adventurer accepts not to *be* anything other than free. After the sub-man, the serious man, and the nihilist, the adventurer corresponds to the first attitude which de Beauvoir partly considers as moral (1947, p80) (in that adventurers positively engage with their freedom in the world but fail to completely realize this freedom by acknowledging others).

"*He throws himself into enterprises with ardor […] but does not attach himself to the end in view; only to conquer it. […] He likes action for action's sake, he finds his joy in deploying throughout the world a freedom which remains indifferent to its content. […] this choice is very close to a genuinely moral attitude. The adventurer does not propose to be; it makes itself deliberately lack of being, it expressly aims at existence*" (1947, p81).

The shortcoming of this attitude, and the reason why it is not ultimately considered to be satisfactory for the existentialists, is that in engaging with their own freedom in the world, adventurers still display bad faith in refusing to acknowledge the freedom of others. Indeed, adventurers are process-driven and have no regards for the ends which they pursue: they are not trying to use their freedom to contribute to projects which would benefit the human world (by helping liberate others, for instance) and if they do so, it is incidental. In order to remain free (that is, independent from given ends, from facticity perhaps), the adventurer is likely to neglect others, thus failing to understand that his own freedom is actually contingent upon that of others. This is where harm to freedom occurs. Should the adventurer realize that his

freedom is finite if others are not free, he is likely to close in on an authentic and moral attitude (which, de Beauvoir makes clear, would no longer be "the adventurer") (1947, p77).

De Beauvoir explains that the attitude of the adventurer is not always pure (with complete detachment) (1947, p76) and can be intertwined with passion (e.g. Don Juan) or with the values of the serious world (e.g. conquistadors). Even when it is "pure", its shortcoming remains salient: others are neglected. Think, for instance, of a successful businessman who needs not pursue wealth or fame *per se* but merely embarks on or fosters projects for the sake of the process, for the sake of "growth" (an undefined end). The same could be said about a politician who, whilst valuing wealth and power (without taking these ends to be absolute), mostly seeks to "win" (no matter what) and appears to be pursuing a never-ending (for there is no set end) quest. Those individuals do not display bad faith by way of seriousness (for they do not take ends or values as absolute, merely as necessary or instrumental) or nihilism (for they positively engage with existence). However, they do display bad faith by thinking that the freedom of others stops where theirs starts and by not acknowledging that to be authentically free, they need others not *only* as workforce, as an audience, as opponents, as customers, as users, but first as equals.

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I believe that individuals pursuing power or wealth for the sake of doing it rather than doing so for a more noble objective, or at least for a given end rather than for the process itself, can qualify as adventurers. One could argue that this is the case with a number of politicians or

other high-ranking individuals within organizations and institutions. What this description highlights about the existentialist perspective on freedom is, once more, that an ethical attitude implies caring for the freedom of others.

The passionate man is comparably close to an authentically moral attitude but falls victim to a different shortcoming: his pursuit of freedom is blinded by subjectivity. The passionate man finds a person, object or cause and subjectively provides it with unique and absolute significance. Unlike the serious man, the passionate man does not try to erase himself behind this chosen end, but makes it to be important precisely because he -and only he- perceives it. The rest of the world is of little relevance to the passionate man, who de Beauvoir thus qualifies as a "partial nihilist" (1947, p83). Unlike the adventurer, the passionate man cares about the end which he pursues, but he still exhibits contempt for others insofar as he does not recognize their existence and freedom as similarly important, as worthy of the object, person, or cause he is pursuing. De Beauvoir speaks of "manic passions" as opposed to "generous passions", where the end is rendered desirable but not closed to others (1947, p82).

"*if man prefers the earth he has discovered to the possession of this earth, a painting or a statue to their material presence, it is because they appear to him as possibilities open to other men. Passion is only converted into authentic freedom if, through the targeted being - thing or man - one destines its existence to other existences, without pretending to entangle it in the thickness of the in-itself* " (1947, p84).[25]

De Beauvoir explains that this attitude resembles an authentic attitude insofar as the passionate man is looking at a project via his subjectivity (1947, p85), which he does not try to get rid of. However, a truly moral attitude would necessitate that he does not close this end and himself to the existence of others but instead let both his freedom and that which his subjectivity has revealed meet and serve the freedom of said others. In other words, he must leave possibility open, then and only then can the human world be populated by projects which are desirable and revealed by subjectivity instead of projects which are used to escape

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[25] "si l'homme préfère la terre qu'il a découverte à la possession de cette terre, un tableau ou une statue à leur présence matérielle, c'est en tant qu'ils lui apparaissent comme des possibilités ouvertes à d'autres hommes. La passion ne se convertit en liberté authentique qui si à travers l'être visé -chose ou homme- on destine son existence à d'autres existences, sans prétendre l'engluer dans l'épaisseur de l'en-soi » 1947, p84.

freedom. The passionate man must accept that he cannot be one with the chosen project. That is, whether it is a person, an object or a cause, one can never keep it completely away from others, and can never not be somewhat apart from it.

The passionate man can, for instance, be passionate about his own creation or finding but refuse to let it be in a way that could benefit others, thus prioritizing his own subjectivity above all else (1947, p81). Think, for instance, of the founder of a political party or company who believes that he and only he can lead this movement, never letting others substantially contribute to shaping its impact on the world. Suppose that this person is not primarily motivated by power or wealth but believes in the righteousness of their creation for mankind. In that instance, appealing to one's own subjectivity only and refusing to consider that however right one may be, they cannot foster a project without taking other perspectives into account is ultimately immoral. Imagine, at a stretch, a billionaire nearly succeeding in colonizing space or Nick Bostrom succeeding in getting rid of death: it is unlikely that in either instances the freedom of others will be of any relevance in comparison to the pursuance of the project itself. That is to say, neither case appears likely to yield voluntary, large scaled violence, but one can easily imagine that those whose perspective or possibilities do not align with the projects of the passionate men will simply be "collateral damages". The genre of science-fiction often speaks for itself, with futuristic visions displaying the world as perceived and desired by a few and with complete disregard towards the existence of those who fall outside of this narrative (i.e. only white men go to space and live forever).

On attempting authenticity: the critic and the artist

As has been mentioned, de Beauvoir appears to base her categorization of those different attitudes on her lived experience, referring to a number of behaviours she encountered in and around herself. It is fair to assume that the two attitudes which she subsequently describes, i.e. critical thought and creative action, are similarly based on actual behaviours. She explains that "a number of intellectuals" attempt to surmount the ambiguity of their condition by way of those attitudes (1947, p86). As such, de Beauvoir may have frequently observed those behaviours in her own circle.

The critic, as opposed to the nihilist, is described as sufficiently stable not to fall into the "anxiety of negation" (1947, p86). This means that the critic is detached from the serious world without necessarily thinking that there is absolutely no values or meaning left to care about. Indeed, the critic values "universal, interporal, objective truth" (1947, p86), making his contestation of the serious world a positive movement (aimed at something). De Beauvoir explains that the critic perceives himself as an independent mind who nevertheless, for he does not exist outside of facticity (nationality, religion, etc), still "takes a side" (1947, p87). The difference between the critic and the serious man is that the critic is aware of the subjectivity of his parti-pris and does not take the cause which he did not necessarily choose but fell into to be absolute.

The artist (which de Beauvoir also calls writer) "attempts to realize existence as an absolute" (1947, p87) without falling into the trap of seriousness for their creation is not taken to be absolute in itself. Indeed, the writer and the sculptor create objects which are what human life is not: they have a signification, they stop time (1947, p88). Those objects thus point at the ambiguity of human existence by "returning to the positive" (meaning that unlike humans, closure is possible, a work of art can be complete) (1947, p88). De Beauvoir warns against the possibility of returning to the serious should the artist believes himself to be absolute, to be serious, too (1947, p88). The artist must always remember the ambiguity of their condition, thus succeeding in wanting being (via their creations) but not in trying to be. Like the critic, the artist must be situated in the world in order to reveal it (1947, p98).

Importantly, and as opposed to the inauthentic attitudes listed hereinabove, the critic and the artist do not disregard the existence and subjectivity of others. Wanting being implies understanding the role that others have to play. There must be others to "reveal" the world, and their interference is necessary (1947, p90). For they both want "being" (not to be something, but for something to be), the critic and the artist know that there must be others, and that they must be free (1947, p92).

De Beauvoir then describes the "aesthetic" attitude, which consists in pure contemplation (of historical events as they unfold, for instance) and is not deemed sustainable for complete detachment is not realistic. The artist and the critic, as a result, maintain their detachment by

way of a project: they direct and preserve what is (a historical event, for instance) via something that is not themselves. As explained, the critic and the artist cannot afford pure contemplation and must be situated in the world for their projects to reveal what was and what could be. De Beauvoir explains that in the face of the past, which no action can change, all that can be done is to "prevent their story (of the forever victim and executioner) from falling back into the indistinct night of being, to reveal it, to integrate it into the human legacy, to elevate it to the dignity of the aesthetic existence which bears its own finality" (1947, p97).[26]

It must be noted, to conclude this study of the profiles which de Beauvoir created, that those were not intended to be absolute, with people falling into one of these categories or the other. Those profiles must be understood as gross characterization of infinitely more nuanced behaviours which could, for instance, be displayed by the same person at different points in their life, or even their day. This is why I will not examine SNS in the light of each category separately, but will instead use the clues which de Beauvoir provided us with in order to identify harm to freedom ni the manner in which SNS are designed and in the manner in which we use them.

Chapter III – Existentialist Ethics and the Threat to Freedom on Social Media

I will now apply the framework of existentialist ethics to SNS; I will begin by examining the question of distraction and creation on social media, both with a focus on the SNS Tiktok (A). I will then reflect on the question of connection and public conversation on SNS (B), and will finish by discussing action and political engagement on SNS (C). Section B and C will be informed by a focus on the sites Twitter and Facebook.

How can a technology harm freedom according to existentialist ethics?

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[26] « À l'égard du passé, aucune action n'est plus possible ; il y a eu la guerre, la peste, le scandale, la trahison, et nous n'avons aucun moyen d'empêcher que cela n'ait été ; sans nous, le bourreau s'est fait bourreau, la victime a subi son sort de victime ; tout ce que nous pouvons faire, c'est d'empêcher leur histoire de retomber dans la nuit indistincte de l'être, c'est de la dévoiler, de l'intégrer au patrimoine humain, de l'élever à la dignité de l'existence esthétique qui porte en soi sa finalité ». 1947, p97.

Before diving into this analysis, I will provide an overview of the manner in which I believe harm to freedom as described in the Ethics of Ambiguity can be conceptualized in relation to technology. In doing so, I am drawing from de Beauvoir's discussion on the question of technology as well as from my own interpretation of how existentialist ethics could apply to the digital world:

First and foremost, what de Beauvoir considers to be *harm* is certainly oppression and violence when it is not justified. Indeed, violence is not systematically deemed unethical and depending on the situation at hand, can be necessary (1947, p120); it could for instance be that violence is warranted to bring an oppressive regime to an end. Despite this, there are occurrences in which violence is not a mean to a noble end, and is either blind or directed at people who are not harming others. We can consequently identify harm to freedom in **technologies which foster violence and oppression** without taking responsibility (to assess its legitimacy and to try to prevent it when it is a source of illegitimate harm).

In the same vein, harm can also be identified in a technology which, instead of connecting us to others, **pits us against each other and incentivizes antagonisms**. This needs not result in violence to be problematic: it is simply that technology, particularly if it calls itself "social", ought to be working towards constructive rather than destructive relationships.

Furthermore, I believe that it is possible to equate harm (to freedom) to that which perpetuates or even promotes bad faith and inauthenticity. An authentic attitude implies the absence of an "escape strategy", of attempts not to be free. As such, we can identify harm to freedom in **technologies which creates or fosters such escape strategies**.

Harm can also be identified in the potential which is lost if a **technology could be used to promote freedom but does not try**. De Beauvoir explains that, should there be no justification for the existence of a technology other than save time and increase comfort and productivity, said technology can be deemed useless and absurd (1947, p100). She considers such goals short-sighted and self-defeating for there is no point in saving time and effort for the sake of doing so. It is particularly true if the narrative surrounding a technology falsely capitalizes on the value of freedom: we are invited to doubt the validity of a technological discourse which

equates freedom with more time, less effort. For instance, dishwashers and washing machines did not emancipate women nor did they destabilize the serious world by which they were oppressed. This critic has gained in pertinence in the digital age, where it is no longer only question of fridges or planes, but of computers and the internet. The narrative according to which technologies save time and increase comfort is still omnipresent and appears to be the guiding light of many tech companies, including social media platforms (Google, 2023).

Genuine freedom requires some sort of positive engagement with the world. One cannot behave like the nihilist and stop at *not being*. It is necessary to *create being* in the world, to give value to projects by way of subjectively revealing them. Such a process cannot be undertaken in isolation and should always be a collective enterprise. This means that harm to freedom can be identified in technology which prevents engagement with the world, or **gives users the illusion that they are positively engaging with the world** when they are not, in fact, taking action.

Having provided this brief overview, I will now move onto the application of the framework to social media. I will begin by discussing the manner in which SNS platform capitalize on behaviours which are akin to what de Beauvoir describes as escape strategies.

A) SNS and Freedom: Distraction and Content Creation as Escapes

De Beauvoir's stance on the unethical nature of technologies which provide comfort and distraction to the masses is clear and needs no speculation:

"*the oppressed can fulfill his freedom as a man only in revolt […] when he leaves the factory where a mechanical job absorbs his transcendence [and finds] diversions in which this*

transcendence ends by petering out: there you have the politics of the American employing class which catches the worker in the trap of sports, "gadgets," autos, and frigidaires". (1947)[27]

I believe that existentialism can explain why we seek effective distractions in SNS (to escape our freedom) whilst pointing at the responsibility of those who design it that way. It can, with this understanding, help us detach the idea of freedom as what we want from the idea of freedom as open-endedness; this is particularly relevant in today's SNS landscape where it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between what we genuinely want and the manufactured desires which have become commonplace in the wake of brands and influencers.

On killing boredom

SNS are highly stimulating (Haynes, 2018) and can be navigated at the flick of a thumb. When scrolling, users need not be subjected to the pre-defined length of a movie or radio broadcast, and so they can theoretically spend as much time as they want on social media platforms. This is rendered easier by the ubiquitous portable devices which support those platforms, and means, ultimately, that social media users can entertain themselves at will. In that sense, I argue that SNS, by way of distraction, can temporarily neutralize the anxiety which existentialists describe. Using distractions not to think (be it about existential questions or else) is neither a new phenomenon nor one particularly attached to SNS, however, the nature of SNS makes it so that such behaviours are rendered easier. In other words, we have created technologies that allow us to behave like the sub-man whenever we want: we have killed boredom.

Indeed, the behaviour of the sub-man as described by de Beauvoir essentially comes down to avoidance. The sub-man's acts are "never positive choices, only escapes" (1947). Evidently, not all SNS users perfectly fall into this category, but avoidance is one of the reasons why we repeatedly pick up our phones and scroll. Indiscriminately, it can be to avoid boredom on public transport or to avoid thinking about life choices: to feel disempowered and indifferent

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[27] "[…] un travail mécanique absorbe sa transcendance, des divertissements ou celle-ci achève de se perdre : c'est la politique du patronat américain qui prend l'ouvrier au piège des sports, des gadgets, des autos et des frigidaires" p110 in the French edition, translation by https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/ambiguity/ch03.htm#s2

to one's freedom and to refuse to consider the extent of possibilities can, in more practical terms, simply correspond to the frequent need to open TikTok or Instagram not to think about the future. De Beauvoir explains that we turn to such mechanisms for fear of being "available" to choice. SNS do not provide a way not to think at all, but provide sufficiently effective stimulation not to think *about* that which is undesirable, not too deeply, not for too long. Much writing has been done in an attempt to find ways not to succumb to SNS distraction,[28] but we tend to elude the fact that SNS create a problem as much as they respond to one. SNS do not impose mindless distraction onto us as much as they propose it.

On manufacturing desire

Take, for instance the case of a Reddit user who, on January 26, posted the following message on the website: "I was recently dumped and I've been going through a-lot of emotions. I use Tiktok constantly throughout the day to distract myself but I feel as though I am building an unhealthy coping mechanism with the app. […] At night, I find myself scrolling through Tiktok for hours until I cannot physically keep my eyes open and pass out".[29] The experience of this user is characteristic of the relationship we can have to social media, and it is a good point of departure to illustrate our tendency towards distraction when we wish to avoid thinking about something. For the purpose of illustration, I will be using the example of the SNS Tiktok, a giant which is now short of 2 billion monthly active users (Iqbal, 2023). Tiktok rose in popularity during the Covid-19 pandemic, as we collectively experienced more boredom and anxiety (Ducharme, 2021), and is known to be widely addictive (Montag, 2021).

Tiktok is an ecosystem of its own and can keep users entertained for hours at a time, it does not require of its users that they leave the app for any purpose, and wants itself a place to watch, post and search anything of interest. University of North Carolina Professor Francesca Tripodi explains that this is a voluntary choice: "TikTok's algorithm tends to keep people on the app, making it harder for them to turn to additional sources to fact-check searches" and users have said about the app that since it knows what they want to see, they see no reason to go out of their way to find more (Huang, 2022). As I have discussed, SNS are designed to

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[28] See for instance this article or this article.
[29] https://www.reddit.com/r/BreakUps/comments/10m2rxd/using_tiktok_as_a_distraction/

retain users, and as such, have no financial interest in driving them away from the platform other than via website clicks in the context of paid advertisement. This results in a closed environment within which users can stay, where everything is handed to them on a silver plate and labeled as "for you", and which they can use as their main source of information. As Tiktok is increasingly being used as a search engine, it has been noticed that the manner in which users fact-check a video and decide whether or not it is credible is by browsing the comments (Huang, 2022). If enough people seem to validate the information, it is considered viable.

That is not to say that Tiktok users do not retain any critical thinking, but they need not, in any case, believe everyone and everything they see to be heavily influenced by the app. What is increasingly obvious about the app's influence is that it is not such and such brand, or such and such user which are particularly influencing, but the combination of trends and personalization. Student V. Peter, who uses Tiktok, explained this problem to a New Yorker journalist, Kyle Chayka: she, for instance, had never like leg warmers much, but somehow, she ended up buying a pair. She does not remember a specific brand or influencer promoting leg warmers, instead, "the algorithm […] had decided that leg warmers and jewelry were what she was going to see", and so they stuck in her mind, and so she bought them (Chayka, 2022). Just like the character of the sub-man blindly adopting the values of a specific system so they do not have to think about what could be better, Tiktok users can content themselves with the world they see through the app. Except, perhaps, for the fact that they need not feel as if they are conforming against their individuality, after all, it is a "for you" page, and so it does not feel like someone else's world. But we are never kept from the realization that it is not truly us who are doing the thinking, and as Chayka puts it, "at times, the computer sometimes seems more in control of our choices than we are" (Chayka, 2022). Indeed, the first choice which is often made on our behalf is to want to consume: Tiktok does not help its users decide whether or not they want to buy, but what they want to buy. One of the rewards for popularity on the platform is the possibility to partner with advertisers and to get paid to promote things to others (Tiktok, 2023). What makes this process all the more problematic is the fact that although SNS algorithms make choices on users' behalf, it is very difficult for said users to provide feedback: it is, for the most part, a one-sided process in which using the app means being at the receiving end of a decision machine. Just like the manner in which de Beauvoir

explains that the sub-man is sometimes kept in a child-like state, Tiktok users are subjected to an algorithm that just knows better: it knows better who they are and what they want.

Since one of the dominant narrative surrounding technology is that it exists to make our lives easier,[30] to save us time (Google, 2023), we do not always tend to see a problem in an app that requires less thought from us and does more of the groundwork when it comes to finding information. After all, it may be tempting to let Tiktok recommendations dictate our day so as to avoid decision-fatigue or to feel connected to others (Hart, 2022). I believe that existentialist ethics comes in useful to reflect about this phenomenon, as it provides an explanation as to why, when offered the possibility to make less choices, to live easier lives, we jump on the opportunity, and why it is unethical. Because it associates this behaviour with avoidance, the existentialist view of freedom does not allow for this attitude to be considered authentic, even if we choose to agree to it, and even if we feel like those are the decisions we would have made on our own, with the algorithm just being quicker at figuring it out. It could be argued, with a different view on freedom, that after all, using SNS to make our lives easier to and generally think less is a display of freedom, that we are more free with such technologies because we are gaining time and bandwidth to think about other things. That is not something which de Beauvoir endorses, as she makes clear when drawing the portrait of the sub-man that delegating one's thinking to a third party is a display of fear in the face of all the thinking we should be doing for ourselves.

On creation and the content machine

Still with a focus on Tiktok, I will now reflect on why the manner in which the app calls its active users "creators" may not be accurately reflecting the experience of using the platform. As opposed to merely scrolling down one's feed, drafting and posting Tiktok is a more active use of the app and may feel less like delegating one's choices to the platform and more like displaying one's individuality. It is worth reflecting upon the flattering term of "creator", which may indeed make one feel like they are using their creativity and in doing so, are thinking for

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[30] Note that this historical narrative is perfectly justified in the fact that, for example, medical, transportation, information and communication technologies do make our lives easier. I believe that by virtue of mostly being true, this narrative has been generalized and that we tend to assume to that technology does make our life easier by default.

themselves. The problem with content creation on Tiktok is that, comparably to what is shown on a users' "for you page", the type of content which users are incentivized to post is not random. In order to reach other users, creators are highly encouraged to follow trends, either by using trendy "audios" (snippets of sounds which characterize Tiktok trends) or perhaps by discussing a trendy topic. If a user were to post a video without any of these cues, it is unlikely that they would be any successful (Seabrook, 2022).

What this means is that posting Tiktoks can also constitute a form of distraction, a form of escape, since users do not have to reflect about what to talk about and what to create: they already have guidance. The app is channeling human creativity into trends, and this does not result in users approaching the status of what de Beauvoir described as "artists", that is, those who immortalize existence in their creations and reveal the world whilst acknowledging that they can never be, like their creation, complete and frozen in time. It may, at first sight, look like those processes are similar, after all, whilst some Tiktokers take their creations seriously and see popularity as an end in itself, I believe that most users do not take themselves or their videos seriously. However, the difference lies in the fact that what is created does not reveal anything other than what is trending. Users do not reveal their own experience or the world around them, what is revealed through the millions of hours of content which are being published every day is merely the world according to Tiktok.

To better understand this phenomenon, it is worth confronting the nature of the content shared on Tiktok to the manner in which de Beauvoir thinks about art. Unlike more traditional art forms, the content which is being shared on Tiktok is short-lived and subject to the algorithm's preference for content which is newer and more importantly, which connects to a trend (Worb, 2022). Videos are produced to be viewed as fast and as much as possible, not to last. As such, Tiktok is no digital museum, and although content does not disappear off of the platform, just like old tweets or old Facebook posts are still accessible if searched for, it might as well be: no one ever looks back. I believe that this corresponds to a display of inauthenticity insofar as creators are incited to care for metrics on the platform as what is significant and on the other hand, not to care about the intrinsic value of their creations. As such, either by way of seriousness or nihilism, creation becomes purposeless.

Moving forward from the ideas of distraction and of creation, I will now seek to examine the effect of SNS on conversation and on connection.

B) The Mirage of Humanity: On the Inauthenticity of SNS Connection

It could be argued, against the idea that social media is harming freedom by incentivizing users to be able to distract themselves ad nauseum, that SNS actually aim at fostering connection with others, and that completely passive usage, however commonplace, is incidental. I believe that this can be debunked by analyzing the type of conversations which take place on SNS. That is not to say that social media platforms are ill-intentioned and aim at sabotaging the public conversation, but it cannot be said that they succeed in creating a healthy forum in which users realize their freedom and are able to discuss with others in a way that is not ridden with displays of bad faith.

The structuring powers of SNS

In order to address this question, it is first necessary to lay out the foundation of this argument, which is that SNS have unprecedented structuring powers over the public conversation. Indeed, SNS have a transformative effect over society, and have, for instance, become the privileged channel of activists who seek to gain support in their fight for liberation (Castells, 2012). There are several reasons behind this, the first of which is that SNS are simply the most efficient mean of communication if someone wishes to reach as many people as possible in as little time as possible. A tweet can be seen by millions in a matter of hours, and as opposed to a message delivered on TV, it can be directly answered to by users from across the world. Neither blogs, nor forums and other websites do not have as many users active at once (Kepios, 2023). This means that SNS have become the default channel for sharing ideas, but also for finding ideas.

Tiktok is for instance increasingly being used as its own search engine (Pierce, 2022), in part because of its efficient algorithm and personalized results, but also because "that tailoring is coupled with a sense that real people on the app are synthesizing and delivering information, rather than faceless websites" (Huang, 2022). This phenomenon seems to be subject to a

generational divide and particularly tied to this platform, with about half of young users preferring Tiktok to traditional search engines as a mean to look up information (Huang, 2022). Note that this has not gone unnoticed by the leader in this category, the tech giant Google, which, in a movement that demonstrates the structuring power of SNS over the rest of the internet, has since then began to adapt its search results by incorporating more images and videos, and by creating "Youtube shorts" on its platform Youtube (Huang, 2022).

It sometimes feel as if the rest of the internet had been deserted, and that one can only hope for small islands of activity to grow outside of the platforms owned by tech giants. New Yorker journalist Kyle Chavka, whom I have mentioned in a previous section, describes his experience in trying to sign up for a photo-sharing app which is free of algorithmic curation and only displays content (in this case, photography) in chronological order. The app is named Glass, and although Chavka claims to have had a "pleasant experience" on it given that he did not find himself irritated by recommended content or by short videos (referring to Instagram Reels, which resemble Tiktoks and have taken over the photo-sharing app), he felt as if there was not enough content for him to see: "because [his] friends haven't joined yet. The gravitational pull of the major social networks is hard to overcome" (Chavka, 2022).

Importantly, this is true in a political context as well. Such was the experience of Egyptian political activist "Hani", whose story is recounted by author Zeynep Tufekci in her book Twitter and Tear Gas (2017). Hani had been a blogger from the early days of the internet and had acquired a strong readership. His writing was political in nature and was critical of the Mubarak regime, which eventually led to his imprisonment for 6 years. When he was released in 2010, Hani immediately returned to blogging, since it had been an effective way for him to reach others and to have a multiplicity of conversations about the country's future. Hani's enthusiasm was short-lived for upon his return, he found his blog to be completely empty, with no visitors or comments. In a conversation with Tufekci, Hani explained that he had then asked himself "'Where is everybody?' before answering: 'They're on Facebook'" (2017). Indeed, in the span of those few years, the online political conversation had shifted from what was perhaps a multiplicity of locations on the internet towards a few social media platforms, mostly Facebook and later on, Twitter.

Evidently, this warrants a close look at the way conversations are held on SNS. Note that different social media platforms have different mission statements, and that it would, at priori, be unfair to measure them up against the same criterion, such as whether or not they succeed in fostering an ethical conversation, particularly in relation to politics. However, this is something which SNS affect regardless, both because of their structuring powers on the public conversation, and because political conversations and the like are still being held on platforms which, like Tiktok, are not explicitly conversation-based. Indeed, even though Twitter is explicit in its attempt to host the online public conversation (Twitter, 2023) whereas Tiktok states that the aim of its platform is to foster creativity and joy (TikTok, 2023), both affect the way in which we relate to one another online and offline, and both generate conversations: the question is what kind.

On para-social relationships

One of the main characteristics of conversations on SNS is that they tend to be one-sided by design, meaning that for a conversation to begin, one or several people need to respond to one person's original piece of content. For instance, a conversation on Twitter necessarily needs to start under a tweet. Others can choose not to engage in a conversation but to give social signals of approval instead, by endorsing or sharing what that person has said via a like or a retweet. If users want to respond to the tweet, they can leave a comment or "quote tweet" it, meaning that they can embed the tweet in a tweet of their own. This feature often comes across as less of a response to the tweet and more of a new tweet altogether, as it incites people to interact with the new tweet rather than with the original tweet. It is as if, instead of responding to the person who tweeted, the user turned toward a crowd and yelled "that's what I think about what he said".

Leaving a comment may seem like a more straightforward way of engaging into a conversation, but again, this is often one-sided as the author of the tweet can choose whether to reply, who to reply to, and whether they should directly reply or quote tweet the comment saying "that's what I think about what he said". The phenomenon of "reply guys" is interesting in this regard. Reply guys, in SNS language, are users who tend to comment very frequently under the posts of a particular user, mostly women, and whose comments are perceived as

unsolicited or annoying.[31] Reply guys rarely get an answer and yet, they continue to reply. Although this phenomenon alone does not mean that SNS conversations are one-sided and devoid of meaning, it is characteristic of the unbalanced relationship between the person who posts and those who reply. The more followers someone has, the least likely it is that they will be expected to reply back to the people who have interacted with them, but the more likely it is that they will have "reply guys". One of the design choices made by SNS is to create a reward system resulting in users rewarding one another for relevance, and in this system, reply guys are not people, they are an irritating token of relevance. The same can be said of likes and comments, which are validating without being conversational in nature.

SNS conversations additionally tend to be one sided as a result of the frequency and nature of the content which users are expected to produce to maintain engagement. Twitter, Tiktok and Facebook have in common the fact that their algorithms prioritizes the content of users who post more frequently. Since this content is more likely to be seen by more people, it is also more likely to receive more engagement, which it turn will boost it once more. However, because they have to post so frequently and because numbers can soon become too large for them to handle, the people who post content become less and less susceptible to have conversations the more engagement they get.

Users are incentivized to keep producing content to stay relevant. Staying relevant means maximizing one's "algorithmic recognizability" (Tarleton Gillespie) and paying more attention to trends than to other users. This is what scholar Taina Bucher calls a "regime of visibility", in which users are constantly under the "treat of invisibility" (2012). All of those who want to be seen or to be heard, from the political activist to the artist, need to become skilled at posting, which is key both to their success and to their mere existence online (Eichhorn, 2022). In this system, be it on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or Tiktok, users who want to be visible must perpetually fight to stay above the surface. Those who are merely here for the sake of conversation and do not want to post just for posting can still exist, but they are relegated to the bottom, where fewer people can see them. As journalist Chayka put it in an article seeking to understand virality and artists on Tiktok, those who seek visibility "are all trapped by the

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[31] https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/reply-guy/

daily pressure to produce ancillary content—memes, selfies, shitposts—to fill an endless void" (2022).

As such, we may be busy on SNS, but we are not busy positively engaging with the world, we are busy trying to stay relevant. De Beauvoir wrote about totalitarian regimes that they provided people with a "mirage of humanity" (1947, p193). This is, I feel, a description which applies to the manner in which SNS foster an illusion of connection but do, in fact, create para-social relationships between people and their audience. I do not see, in our use of social media, a positive movement, but merely a system which welcomes those who do are bored and offers to choose what to see, what to do and who to be for them, and a system which welcomes those who have something to say and makes them speak constantly so that they can entertain others. It is as if SNS had created a serious world of their own. Even if users were not to take the platforms so seriously and were to use them to their own ends instead, what is encouraged is a selfish form of existence, since others are only rendered visible as content or as metrics.

In the same line of thought, it is worth reflecting on the manner in which SNS are designed so as to incentivize the display of a specific aspect of a person's identity. It is well known that should they desire to "grow a following" (i.e. amass visibility), users should remain focused on a niche, on a specific industry or interest and post content / interact with others accordingly (Seabrook, 2022). The structure of SNS is not propitious to much of a variation in what one chooses to share: a target audiences follow the content of Tiktokers (for example) based on specific expectations. They do not want nor need to see a person as a whole because on SNS, everyone has a "brand".

Harm to freedom can as such be identified in several aspects of this form of communication, which is one-sided and incentivizes a "hyper-self". It can, again, be established in the fact that whilst we are distracting ourselves or chasing a greater following, greater visibility, we are not truly taking action or connecting to others. Because of the influx of content and the need to always stay relevant, SNS see users jump from trend to trend, and once a person or topic has lost collective attention, it is as if it never existed. I do not believe that para-social relationships

are a sufficient form of connection to lead to constructive conversation; one sided by nature, the best this kind of relationship can offer is a mirage of humanity.

On antagonistic relationships

In addition to para-social relationships, I will now reflect on the antagonistic relationships which are found on SNS. For the sake of a discussion which mostly focuses on the manner in which we are using social media not to debate, but to antagonize each other, I will focus on the platform Twitter. That is because Twitter's mission statement is to "serve the public conversation" and to give people a "free and safe space to talk" (Twitter, 2023). This makes it the most interesting platform to discuss in terms of its effect on conversation and how this aligns with what de Beauvoir considers to be harmful.

Of course, and as I have explained, different platforms have different ways of connecting people and different objectives, but there are phenomena which tend to be common denominators amongst SNS, such as distraction and the constant need to create content to stay afloat, but also a specific manifestation of a type of behavior endemic to the internet: trolling. Trolling is defined as "the act of leaving an insulting message on the internet in order to annoy someone" (Cambridge Dictionary), and I will review the manner in which SNS, and Twitter in particular, tend to foster this phenomenon by design and what this means for the public conversation.

Research on trolls has found that the behavior of people who, on the internet and in video games, seek to annoy others, tends to be associated with sadism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Cook, 2017). Whether or not this means trolls are "evil" falls out of the scope of this thesis, but they are certainly unlikely to be considered a force for good. It is rather clear, if we apply the existentialist framework, that trolls are not displaying an authentically moral attitude for they do not seek to create value in the world and are ill-intended towards others. We could as such find that the design of SNS is not satisfactory with regards to freedom if it does not attempt to minimize this kind of behaviour. The problem is that trolls tend to cause trouble which entertains others and boosts the overall platform use, as is explained by a report from the Centre for Countering Digital Hate: "Social media

companies run on a core business model where the core metric is "time spent" online. As such they benefit financially from anything that boosts activity. This, unfortunately, includes storms that start as a result of bullying or harassing behaviour" (Counter Hate, 2022). Although SNS generally have moderation systems in place, those systems only catch the content which uses profanity and some of the content which incites to violence (Counter Hate, 2022). Anything else is considered to be a part of the game and can even be a trend. Indeed, and although we are hopefully not all psychopaths, it takes but at trend to turn us all into trolls as we antagonize strangers in a group movement. Most of the time, we do so because we think that this stranger deserves the backlash for X, Y or Z reason and as importantly, because it is what everyone is talking about.

maple cocaine
@maplecocaine

Each day on twitter there is one main character. The goal is to never be it

3:20 AM · Jan 3, 2019

31.5K Retweets   **4,719** Quote Tweets   **119.2K** Likes

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I believe that this phenomenon is characteristic of the manner in which our use of SNS and what those platforms benefit from, design for and allow are misaligned with authenticity. We are neither positively realizing our freedom in the world nor acknowledging that we can when we are too busy deciding who and what is unethical online. This brings me to the next section, which will be focused on political engagement, one of the manner in which de Beauvoir conceptualizes the positive realization of our freedom when such engagement is not self-interested and consists in a true attempt to create values. I will argue that as much as SNS can foster an illusion of connection, they can also foster an illusion of political engagement.

C) The Illusion of Authenticity in Political Engagement and Action on SNS

On Hashtag activism

To narrow down on what positively realizing one's freedom in the world might mean, I think that political engagement is a good example. Indeed, it a straightforward way of staying involved with one's environment and with the world, as political engagement is one of the manners in which one can try to have a say in the choices which are made for the future. Similarly to the manner in which they create an inauthentic form of human connection, I believe that SNS incentivize a performative way of discussing politics. We may feel as if we have sufficiently involved ourselves by using a trending hashtag or attacked a complete stranger whose ideas we disagree with, but what we have truly done is displayed the virtue which we either think we have or wish we had. Of course, politics has always, in part, consisted in delivering a convincing performance, from the Greek agora to the televised debates. However, neither of these places were open to all and share the potential for conversation which social media had. In theory and in the narratives which SNS like Twitter bring forward, social media can allow for everyone to be heard and to speak to one another. Turning this possibility into a rat race for content production and consumption is our mistake, in design and in use.

I will focus on the phenomenon of hashtag activism, which consist in using hashtags, an SNS feature allowing all posts relating to the same topic to be searched for, to discuss or endorse a socio-political movement. The hope with hashtag activism is that it can harness the power of social media in order to allow for change to occur (Queens, 2022). There are many successful examples of liberation movements having benefited from the use of hashtags to spread and rally support (Global Citizen, n.d). Think, for example, of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which "seeks to highlight racism, discrimination, and racial inequality experienced by black people" and to put an end to the incidents of racially motivated police brutality in the U.S. (Black Lives Matter, 2023). It is undeniable that SNS have contributed to the success of this movements and others by way of providing an easily accessible network to people with a message.

So what then, is the issue with hashtag activism? The example of Black Lives Matter demonstrates that it is possible for movements to gain genuine traction and support online,

and calls for precaution should one be tempted to deem online activism less valid than offline activism. However, I believe that being political online can, for many users, constitute an excuse not to be political offline. The term "slacktivism" has been coined to describe the practice of supporting an action without needing to produce much effort at all (Cambridge Disctionary, n.d). Posting with a hashtag or arguing on SNS can make one feel as if they are engaged in political conversations with nothing substantial to show for it other than having been part of the worldwide "support". Although this is better than nothing, we ought to wonder if it is enough. Most particularly, I wonder if the success stories of hashtag activism are the rule or the exception.

Indeed, since SNS heavily revolve around trends, it seems that even political engagement is turned into one. This raises interrogations regarding what is considered relevant and what never makes it to the surface, but also about how long it stays to the surface. As has been discussed, content and trends on SNS are short-lived, which does not foster constructive movements. De Beauvoir makes clear that the groundwork of making the world better ought to transcend time: our collective projects and ideas are supposed to outlive us (1947), but instead, we outlive them on the daily. This raises questions about the authenticity of our online political action: is treating the liberation of others as a trend a display of nihilism?

This question cannot be answered straightforwardly as it would necessitate to understand the intentions of each individual user. However, I will later come back to this subject when reflecting on the manner in which SNS can be designed so as to support freedom.

*Fake News and blind forces: the dangers of misinformation on SNS*

What could be considered as similarly concerning for freedom is the fact that when users do pick up a fight on SNS and decide to take action into the offline world, such an action may be ill-informed. Indeed, the phenomena of the circulation of "fake news" and misinformation on SNS is well-known: ranging from benign errors to entire conspiracy theories, information which is found on SNS is not always trustworthy. Numbers vary, but for example, it has been estimated that on Tiktok, "for a sampling of searches on prominent news topics, almost 20 percent of the videos presented as search results contained misinformation" (NewsGuard,

2022). Algorithms have been known to accidentally push such narratives forward as they tend to be more outrageous than the truth and thus more likely to grab the eye (Metz, 2021).

This brings about de Beauvoir's idea of "blind force" which arises from the failure to think for oneself and to decide what actions are necessary and to what ends. De Beauvoir did not mean to suggest that those who succumb to this mechanism are unintelligent or responsible for their unethical behaviour: her description of a 16 years old Nazi who contributes to a destroying force, but who is himself a victim of his masters highlights this point (1947, p122); but she is clear on the point that movement which find their roots in illegitimate causes and find their force in "sub-men" are dangerous. As such, and as will be subsequently discussed in the next section, it is clear that SNS have a responsibility to control the narratives which spread on their platforms.

Many conspiracy theories have in common the fact that their believers think that they are more free for the knowledge that they have and that they act with good intentions by attempting to spread their beliefs and to take action against that which they perceive as wrong or evil. The conspiracy theory "Pizzagate" which gained widespread attention in 2016 following its dramatic conclusion, serves as an example of the potential for escalation of such beliefs. The theory, which began to spread on Twitter, claimed that elected Democrats in the U.S were involved in a child-trafficking ring running out of a pizzeria in Washington D.C (Keng & Frenkel, 2020). The conspiracy gained such momentum and such a devoted audience that in December 2016, a gunman who had been using SNS as his source of information and believed himself to be helping the victims of the alleged traffic showed up at the pizzeria, threatened the staff and opened fire. Although this incident claimed no victims, it clearly demonstrated that misinformation found and SNS and grown by way of users sharing it over and over can have disastrous consequences. Not only is the action which is taken offline as a result of online beliefs misplaced and a times dangerous, SNS users are also distracted from more legitimate concerns as they put all of their energy in trying to contribute to solve a problem which is not real.

Having applied the framework of existentialist ethics to analyze harm in SNS design and usage, I will now proceed to the final chapter of the thesis, which will focus on attempting to find solutions to the issues which have been raised.
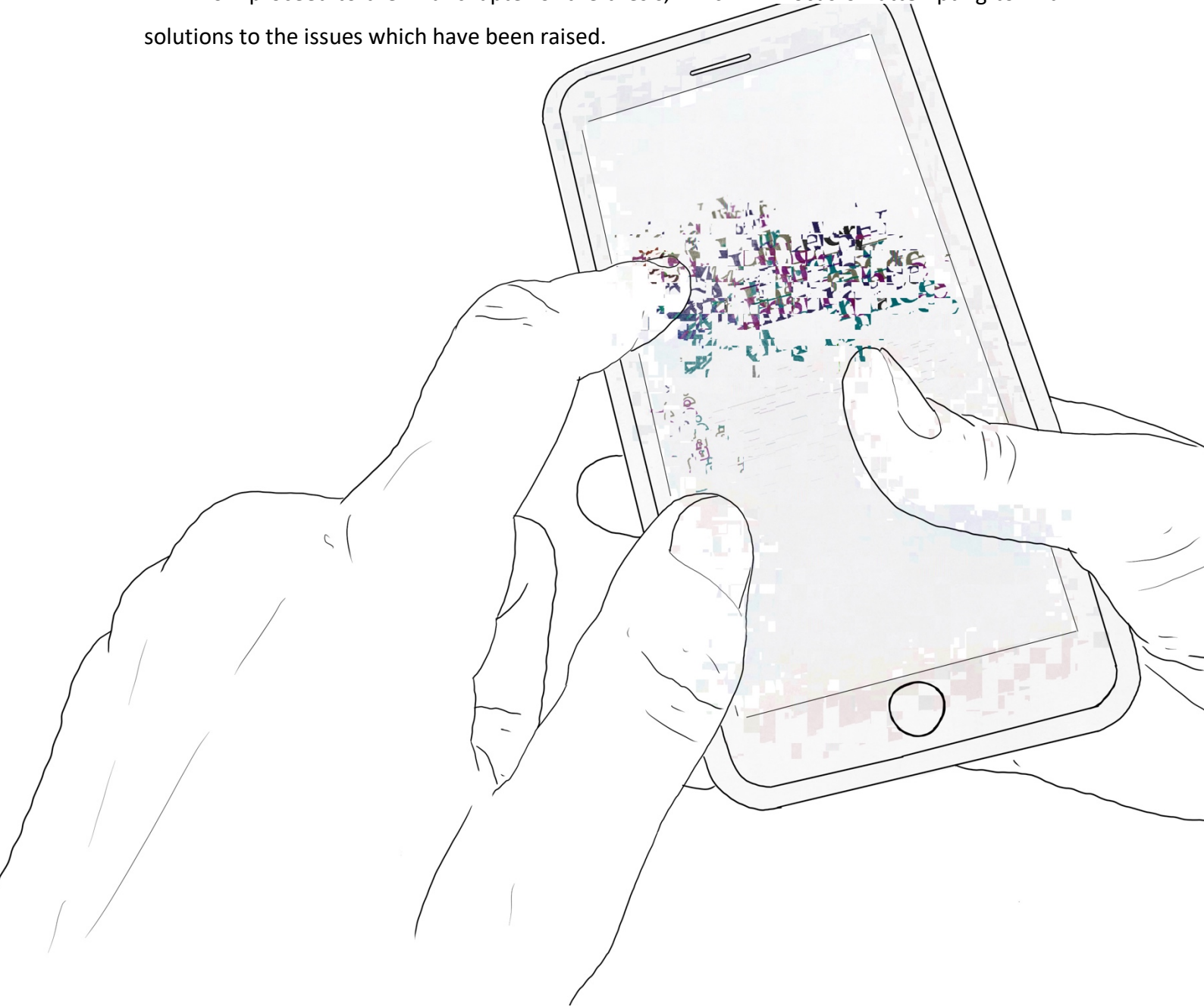
Chapter IV: Exploring Ways to Design Ethical Social Networking Sites

What kind of solutions can existentialist ethics suggest?

I believe that existentialist ethics has allowed for a more nuanced analysis of the harm to freedom which can be identified on SNS. In many ways, the problems which I have identified are not alien to the debate, but the way of framing them in the context of existentialism is sufficiently different to encourage us to take more factors into account than the questions of

control and power. In that regard, I am hoping that existentialist ethics will help reflect on solutions from a fresh perspective. I will begin this chapter by arguing that getting rid of curation algorithms altogether may not be a sufficient solution to harness the power of SNS as a technology which needs not harm freedom, but could also promote it (A). I will then discuss the regulation of SNS and the limits of the law in solving the problems which existentialist ethics identifies (B).

A) Designing for freedom

Could algorithmic curation promote freedom?

The different takes on freedom and SNS which I have discussed at the beginning of this thesis had in common the underlying idea that users and SNS algorithms were at two ends of a spectrum (of control, of power). However, I have argued that it is more realistic to affirm that users are not merely being manipulated by algorithms, but that they have learned to manipulate algorithms too. As has been discussed, they sometimes do so as a display of bad faith. Indeed, existentialist ethics would not depart from the conclusion that we tend to be less free when an algorithm tells us what to watch and who to listen to, but that it is because we do not want to be so free that we ask an algorithm to tell us what to watch and who to listen to.

Similarly, we may not only be polarized because filter bubbles pit us against each other, but also because we feel the need to "be" something in order not to feel the void which comes along with not being anything. We can as such try to define ourselves by what we are not, using a polar opposite as a means of establishing and finding reassurance in our identity. SNS algorithms can reinforce this by promoting attention-seeking behavior that involves attacking those who hold opposing views (think of the serious man needing to discredit other serious men in order to confirm that his world view is the correct one) and receiving endorsements from our own network.

What does this mean if we are thinking about solutions? Existentialist ethics makes clear that SNS are exploiting a tendency which we are inclined to display anyways. We tend to be scared

of open-ended possibility, of our freedom to do or to be something else than what we think we are now, or what we envision for ourselves. It is important to understand this, because in the absence of such a realization, we may assume that the problem of filter bubbles could be solved by getting rid of personalization algorithms altogether; but it could be argued that the problem is not that we are being nudged, but that we are being nudged to escape our freedom. As such, and this remains vastly speculative, we may benefit in designing algorithms not to entrap us in filter bubbles, but to open ourselves to discovery. Indeed, de Beauvoir does not associate freedom with the ability to do whatever we want, but to be yearning towards an open-ended future, to keep thinking about what could be rather than what is. What this means for technology is that it should open up possibilities, and should never be considered an end in itself.

"Being does not mean having the power to do anything, it means transcending what is given towards an open future" (1947).[32]

Of course, arguing about what SNS should stop doing is easier than discussing what they should do. However, existentialist ethics invites us to reflect on the positive actions we can take to realize our freedom, and this should include using the technological means we have at hand. I believe that this prompts us to move beyond the idea of merely removing problematic curation algorithms, and encourages us to consider using SNS to drive positive action. In other words, in order to take advantage of a technology which has the power to connect just about anybody to a completely different person, SNS could be designed so as to, by default, expose users to ideas and people which are new to them. Although implementing this design would be complex and perhaps difficult to sustain financially, the point is that we don't have to solely focus on reducing the harm SNS causes to freedom, but could also explore ways to leverage the technology to promote freedom.

Undeniably, there is value in being able to see what our friends are doing, and in being able to connect with people who are part of the same professional network, or share interests, but SNS can preserve this aspect of their functioning and still create a (perhaps separate) feed in which users are not shown that which is most likely to retain their attention, but a blend of

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[32] « être libre, ce n'est pas avoir le pouvoir de faire n'importe quoi, c'est pouvoir dépasser le donné vers un avenir ouvert »

novelty. Of course, this does not solve the issue of letting an algorithm decide what we would benefit in seeing, or what "new" means to us. This problem is complex, but one of the manner in which the situation could be improved is by ensuring the transparency of the calculations which led an algorithm to a decision.

Such an algorithm should also be designed so as not to push the content of individuals who post more often, and to prevent posts from disappearing into the ether after a couple of hours. This would prevent the current state of affairs in which users have to produce content for the sake of producing content. Indeed, as much as we often (probably rightfully so) consider filter bubbles to be problematic in relation to freedom, it is not only *what* is shown to users which is devoid of interest for the public conversation (given that it polarizes us and makes us less likely to change), but also *when* and for *how long* it is shown to them. If we do not think in terms of what is going to retain attention and make people spend, we are free to spend more time discussing a given topic, to let each other build upon our mutual thoughts rather than fight each other to be the most relevant.

My last point is that SNS should move away from metrics in order to foster more meaningful conversations and authentic creativity rather than emphasize popularity and relevance for their own sake. There does not seem to be a need for likes or comments to be counted ads this merely incites users to compare themselves to one another and to seek to post content which will be validated by or offend many people.

All of those suggestions would probably makes SNS a less attractive place, for a while at least, but that is not an issue. If anything, it is a solution: it would reduce the appeal of social media apps as a 24/7 on demand distraction machines.

The question of paternalism

Of course, this suggestion begs the question of paternalism and of whether SNS should decide what is good for us and what isn't. De Beauvoir raises the following interrogation:

"The ambiguity of freedom, which very often is occupied only in fleeing from itself, introduces a difficult equivocation into relationships with each individual taken one by one. In any event, it is evident that we are not going to decide to fulfill the will of every man. There are cases where a man positively wants evil, that is, the enslavement of other men, and he must then be fought. It also happens that, without harming anyone, he flees from his own freedom, seeking passionately and alone to attain the being which constantly eludes him. If he asks for our help, are we to give it to him?"[33]

The answer seems clear: paternalism is justified when it comes to action against those who harm the freedom of others. This leaves the question of those who are fleeing from their own freedom open-ended. This is important in order to understands what kind of technological nudging is likely to be considered acceptable or even necessary, and what is to be considered unwarranted. I will focus on harm to others, as it is the most straightforward aspect of the question: I believe that improvements can be made to prevent the systematic occurrence of this kind of harm. Indeed, ethical social media would require platforms which are designed and monitored to prevent the spread of violent content which is not related to legitimate liberation movements, and to prevent ill-intentioned individuals, groups, or governments from using the technology as a catalyst for dangerous purposes.

Although this goes against the statements of most SNS which wish to present a politically neutral image (Marantz, 2019), it has become clear that due to algorithmic curation and to content moderation, SNS can never truly be politically neutral (Howard & Muzammil, 2013) and that exceptions are, in any case, made beyond a certain threshold. Think, for example, of the suspension of Donald Trump's accounts from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms following the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol. These actions can be taken preventively instead of punitively, but it raises the problem of determining which accounts should be suspended and which movements are illegitimate. Although these decisions can be challenging, they have been made in the past and failing to make them when needed amounts to avoiding responsibility.

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[33] Translation from https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/ambiguity/ch03.htm#s5

Indeed, I believe that de Beauvoir encourages us to conclude that such action must be taken, not arbitrarily, but sometimes without full certainty that it is justified. Indeed, it may not always be correct, but it is necessary to take responsibility and to build safeguards for the effects which SNS can have on users and on society. Getting it wrong occasionally is preferable to remaining neutral and letting harm occur on a systemic basis. That is because harm to freedom must not be perceived as one sided, with SNS harming users, but as coming from users towards other users, too. As such, SNS not only have a responsibility not to cause harm to users, they also have a responsibility to prevent users from harming one another given that their platforms can be weaponized. Since it is made considerably easier for movements to gain traction on SNS, regardless of whether or not the facts which are presented are true, it falls within the responsibility of SNS to ensure that what is presented as the truth is not dangerous and that the individuals who seek to use those lies to create a movement do not benefit from an instrument to gather a "blind force".

De Beauvoir makes clear about man-made harms that we cannot stay neutral: "one does not submit to a war or an occupation as he does to an earthquake: he must take sides for or against" (1947).[34] I believe that this applies to technology. After all, it is owned and designed by humans who have power over its impact and who are acting in bad faith if they claim to be neutral.

On the question of one's escape from their own freedom, it is, I suppose, more difficult to impose expectations on SNS; but as I have argued, I believe that a promising approach would consist in designing algorithms that encourage openness and discovery instead of providing a void for users to disengage. What such a design would precisely consist in and how it would resist the criticism according to which it is not financially sustainable for platforms remains an open question.

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[34] Translated by https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/ambiguity/ch03.htm#s5

B) On Regulating SNS: Hopes and Limits

The EU initiative

Although action should be taken by SNS, it does not mean that we should solely rely on their acting in good faith to hope for more ethical platforms. It is best to exploit all possibilities available to ensure that they do not cause harm when it can be avoided. This suggestion is not uncommon in the literature discussing SNS and its effect on freedom. As such, I believe that existentialist ethics aligns with those narratives insofar as what can explicitly harm people must be acted against, and that the law can be an effective way to do so. However, I believe that looking at the legislation which is currently being drafted to regulate SNS can also allow us to identify the ethical gaps which the law cannot respond to.

Indeed, as far as legal frameworks are concerned, it is not possible to use the rationale of existentialist ethics and to legislate so as to prevent escapes from freedom or anything abstract as such. What is possible is to find legal bases to regulate SNS in relation to the way they affect users, and although this will not be making SNS ethical de facto,[35] it will help deal with some of the concerns which have been raised in this thesis.

I will briefly discuss the promising example of the European Union's Digital Services Act package[36] to reflect on the extent to which the law can help remedy to some of the ways in which SNS harm freedom. The aim of those two directives is "to create a safer digital space where the fundamental rights of users are protected […]", as the EU intends to catch up with digital technologies which have grown so exponentially that they could not be regulated in a preventative manner. Note that the directives have neither been finalized nor implemented in member states yet, and may be subject to further revisions.

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[35] And should not, but will probably be used as an excuse not to equate ethics with legal compliance and to not take further action.

[36] Which consists in The Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act:
- European Union (2021). Digital Services Act. European Commission. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/digital-services-act-2021-2023_en
- European Commission. (2021). Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on digital markets. Brussels: European Commission. Retreived from https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/proposal-regulation-european-parliament-and-council-digital-markets

Although these directives cover services beyond SNS, they are evidently particularly concerned with the societal impact of these platforms as it is explained that "*online services are being misused by manipulative algorithmic systems to amplify the spread of disinformation, and for other harmful purposes*" (EU, 2021). As a matter of fact, the directives do manage to create provisions mostly specific to SNS by way of taking into account the specificity of "very large online platforms" whose impact is significantly greater and who therefore require further safeguards. Very large platforms are defined as services who have above a threshold of at least 45 million users in the Union, thus qualifying Facebook, Tiktok, Twitter, Instagram, and more (EU, 2021). This piece of legislation display an advanced understanding of the problem since it goes beyond the question of privacy and takes the public conversation into account as one of its points of departure:

"*Very large online platforms are used in a way that strongly influences safety online, the shaping of public opinion and discourse. The way they design their services is generally optimized to benefit their often advertising-driven business models and can cause societal concerns. In the absence of effective regulation and enforcement, they can set the rules of the game, without effectively identifying and mitigating the risks and the societal and economic harm they can cause*" (EU, 2021).

The social media giants will thus have to mitigate the risks they pose to their users and to society. One of the manner in which they are expected to do so is by modifying their curation algorithms and rendering them transparent[37] and optional.[38] Indeed, the EU considers that it is part of the users right to information to be able to access options which are not based on their profiling.[39] This legislation appears to have been drafted with the problem of filter bubbles in mind.

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[37] "Very large online platforms that use recommender systems shall set out in their terms and conditions, in a clear, accessible and easily comprehensible manner, the main parameters used in their recommender systems, as well as any options for the recipients of the service to modify or influence those main parameters that they may have made available, including at least one option which is not based on profiling, […]" (EU, 2021).

[38] "Where several options are available pursuant to paragraph 1, very large online platforms shall provide an easily accessible functionality on their online interface allowing the recipient of the service to select and to modify at any time their preferred option for each of the recommender systems that determines the relative order of information presented to them." (EU, 2021).

[39] This will be enforced by newly created entities within member states as well as financial sanctions.

Limits of regulation

This promising new step, however positive, draws the limits of what the law can do against the harms to freedom which I have discussed. First of all, as is made clear by this example, SNS can only be regulated regionally, leaving users falling outside of that geographical scope in a disadvantaged position. Then, legislation cannot protect users from their own bad faith, as a matter of fact, it cannot conceptualize, let alone respond to bad faith. The EU aims at "enhancing user agency in the online environment" (EU, 2021) which falls back on what the debate mostly identifies as the problem with SNS and freedom: a lack of control. Although the law can try to prevent SNS from harming the public conversation, it cannot tell SNS how to design their platforms so as to foster discovery and communication which is neither one sided nor performative. We must as such remain alert and hold SNS accountable to the positive contribution to the world which they are capable of making and have, as a matter of fact, incidentally made over and over as liberation movements and activists benefited from those platforms to spread awareness and to rally others.

Conclusion

This thesis has allowed me to find that SNS do cause harm to freedom and that the manner in which we conceptualize this harm is important to solve this problem.

Because the idea that SNS take away control from their users does not resist the objection according to which users remain free to choose whether or not to use SNS, and incites us to think of one-dimensional solutions such as deleting one's social media accounts, I have found that it is best not to equate freedom to control. The same can be said about power insofar as it is important to bear in mind that users can be empowered by SNS; it is important both to understand the fact that SNS have a responsibility not only to avoid causing harm, but also to prevent their users from exploiting the platforms to do so, and that it is possible to design those platforms to empower legitimate actors and movements whose contribution to freedom wants itself positive. This necessitates a form of technological paternalism which, I have argued, is acceptable insofar as promoting freedom requires positive action. Of course, this brings about a series of questions: How should SNS be designed to promote freedom? How do we ensure that the choices which are made are right? Where is the limit to paternalism?

I have tried to answer some of these questions by referring to the Ethics of Ambiguity, where de Beauvoir spelled out, with great clarity, when she thought that paternalism (and even violence) could be justified. But however much wisdom we can extract from the writing of those who experienced the effects of collective apathy, it is necessary for us to find ways to design ethical SNS in the present, for the future.

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