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The Ecology of (dis-)Engagement in Digital Environments

Emanuele Arielli[1]

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Abstract
This paper explores some features of the epistemic environment in social media and online communication. We argue that digital environments differ from offline ones in at least two ways: (a) online environments are *thoroughly structured* and programmed. Every action is defined and limited by the underlying code created by the system's developers, providing the tools users need to navigate the online space. In contrast, offline environments are open to chance and unpredictability, allowing for events and actions that the system has not predetermined; (b) every action is traced and used to evaluate levels of engagement with content and posts, with significant epistemic consequences. This creates a "dense" environment in which users are deeply *entangled*. In this regard, the concept of purely passive engagement is challenged, since activities such as just watching a video or reading a post can alter the epistemic landscape and promote specific content with which a person interacts. As a result, online social environments facilitate a variety of indirect communicative and epistemic activities across the network. Given this, the paper suggests that in such settings, attentional disengagement and avoidance should be considered a potential proactive way to modulate self-exposure. This strategy is aimed not only at protecting individuals from harmful content but also at actively shaping the information flow and knowledge structure within the environment. Managing one's own attention can thus significantly influence how information is perceived and disseminated, essentially controlling the personal and collective epistemic environment.

Keywords Social Media · Proxy Agency · Ignoring · Attention

1 Introduction: Digital Environments, Affordances and Agency

Every environment, whether natural or artificial, online or offline, is shaped by "affordances" (Gibson 1979), which are relational qualities that determine how the environment is perceived by subjects, can fulfill their needs, and shape their potential for action and intervention. Agency is determined and partially constituted by the environment in which it is situated (Withagen et al. 2012, 2017; Chemero 2003). Moreover, an environment not only does offer affordances that are the object of intentional and conscious action, but also guides our actions in a more or less subtle manner, assuming an implicitly normative guiding function of human behavior (Rietveld 2008). This is the case not only for the natural environment, but also for technological and cultural ones. They can create new affordances that are made available by human-made tools, media, and devices. In human cultural environments, we might also consider *language* as a system of conventionalized tools thanks to which "we can do things with words". Speech acts are encoded in the conventions of a language by rules that, when used, allow us to perform specific acts (convey information, pose a question, give an order, express emotions, etc.). They allow for extending a subject's possibilities for action and their control over the social and cognitive environment (Searle 1989).

In the context of online communication, we may consider social media environments as characterized by affordances shaped by the structure of digital platforms (Majchrzak et al. 2013; boyd 2010; Bucher and Helmond 2017; for a recent review on the notion of affordances in the context of social media, see Ronzhyn et al. 2023). Social networks provide ways to disseminate content that are not available offline, thus extending and reshaping our communicative agency. A notable example consists in the act of *sharing* other users' posts: in offline environments, we are not able

✉ Emanuele Arielli
arielli@iuav.it

[1] Department of Design and Cultures, Iuav University, Dorsoduro 2206, Venice 30123, Italy

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to just summon what someone else said and to integrate it in our own communication. By making the sharing command available, social media are therefore equipped with affordances that make new forms of communicative action possible (see Arielli 2018; Marsili 2021). However, it is often overlooked that also subtler actions such as liking a post, commenting on it or simply *watching* a video, might play a significant role in spreading content as well. Simply put, just by logging in, our online presence triggers network effects, including epistemological impacts that we might not be fully aware of. Specifically in social media, users' behavior is heavily the object of careful observation, analysis, and design. Their affordances are carefully designed to boost users' interest and engagement. Moreover, online platforms algorithmically analyze and track all activities such as posting, liking, attended content, sharing and so on; the users' action leaves behind a trail of data that are used by the platform, often beyond the user's knowledge, in order to restructure their content's engagement algorithm, subtly improving the appeal of the content they are exposed to, but also to evaluate the appeal of the content itself (Pariser 2011; Dijck 2014; Matz et al. 2020). Therefore, those data not only are used to guide users' engagement, but also to amplify and promote the content in the network.

Building on these premises, this paper's argument will be structured as follows. The affordances of online environments are characterized by two distinctive features that set them apart from offline environments: they are a) "thoroughly designed" and b) "dense" or "entangled". The former implies that the actions possible within these systems are entirely determined by their programming. Trivially, one cannot perform actions that the system has not been programmed to support. These environments create a context governed by rules of use from which one cannot deviate without ceasing to act within them. This does not preclude the violation of pragmatic norms (such as truth-telling, avoiding offense, or refraining from spam), but such violations can only be executed using the tools provided by the platform.

Furthermore, online environments are highly "entangled", as every action and behavior leaves a trace and has systemic and feedback effects. Any action or behavior performed within the digital environments of social media inevitably alters the environment itself, with significant epistemic consequences. Activities such as engaging with content can increase or decrease its visibility and importance, due to the algorithmic adjustment of their reach based on user interaction. Consequently, there is virtually no truly *passive* behavior in these contexts; even seemingly innocuous and inconsequential activities, like viewing, reading posts, or scrolling through a social network, can influence how algorithms prioritize content.

In conclusion, this paper will argue that if it is impossible to disentangle oneself from the externalities of one's actions, even when these appear harmless and passive (such as simply paying attention to content), then it becomes necessary to reconsider the role of non-interaction with these systems—the act of *not paying attention* to the content disseminated within them. "Disengagement" must be analyzed as a fully-fledged action and as a conscious choice in relating to the cognitive and informational environment of online contexts. In other words, compared to offline environments, disengagement in online environments assumes a more direct importance, of which subjects themselves must become aware.

2 Online vs. Offline Environment: Design Constraints and Entanglement

There could be an inclination to equate online and offline communication contexts, leading us to see, for instance, a social network and a physical discussion group, such as those occurring in meeting rooms, as substantially equivalent from the point of view of communicative agency. This perspective suggests that the primary distinction lies merely in the medium employed. However, a fundamental difference exists between online and offline environments that warrants careful consideration and cannot be overlooked. (Floridi 2015; Lieberman and Schroeder 2020)[1]. Online environments, as mentioned in the introduction, are designed so that user interactions can unknowingly enhance content: simply viewing, clicking on, or reading a post, or watching a video might increase its visibility. Even spending more time than the average on a TikTok video can affect how it is distributed to others and influence the future content displayed in your feed. Reading something in a non-digital environment doesn't directly influence the content itself, whereas online interactions do. In the offline world, observing a phenomenon typically doesn't alter it, while digital actions very often have ripple effects in their environment. These effects are governed by systematic mechanisms, unlike the more random nature of interactions in offline settings. Therefore, digital environments are generally:

a) *thoroughly designed* in their functioning, that is, they are non-incidental in what one can do or cannot do in them[2]. This is not the case in offline environments;

[1] On differences between online and offline communication in use by younger demographics, see Mikami and Szwedo 2018.

[2] This does not imply that users are unable to engage in actions that platform developers would prefer to avoid, such as verbal abuse or defamation. Instead, it means that users can only act through the means that the platform has determined to be possible.

b) *dense* (or, we might say, "entangled" or "viscous"), meaning that each user's action, even passive ones like reading or looking at content, has effects on the network itself and on the contents the user will be exposed to.

(a) Concerning the first point, in online environments, we operate within predetermined and programmed worlds created by system developers, from which we cannot deviate unless we ourselves are system operators or hackers. Conversely, in offline environments, despite the presence of social or institutional rules, we are constrained solely by the laws of physics. One might object that offline environments, beyond physical constraints, can also have explicit and pervasive rules, as observed in classrooms, hospitals, prisons, or in sports and games. In all these contexts, we can identify well-defined rules of conduct. Rules can be *constitutive*, as they define the very essence of an activity. A classic example is the rules of chess: moving a piece in a way not permitted by the rules of the game is not merely an unexpected action within the game, but effectively means one is no longer playing chess. Differently, other rules may be *normative* in nature: the violation of these rules may result in sanctions. Examples are a prisoner who violates behavioral norms in jail or a student who commits an act of indiscipline in class. Finally, rules can be *operative*, as they define best practices within an environment, such as the procedures a nurse must follow to assist patients in a hospital ward (Korsgaard 2014; MacCormick 1998; Tanney 2009).

Online environments, akin to their offline counterparts, can incorporate both operative rules (such as netiquette guiding interactions among users) and normative rules (including sanctions for violations, for instance leading to account suspension). However, a fundamental distinction between offline and online environments lies in the fact that the former allows for contingent events and actions that lie outside the system's rules, be they constitutive, normative, or operative. In physical offline environments, individuals can act outside established norms or confront unforeseen situations. Take the example of chess: on a physical board, a player could move pieces in ways that violate the rules, effectively ceasing to play chess. Conversely, a digital chess program typically precludes invalid moves altogether. This principle extends to more structured contexts like hospitals or schools. Despite rigid behavioral norms, exceptional circumstances—such as unforeseen events, emergencies, or natural disasters—can exempt individuals from usual rules, necessitating actions not anticipated by the system. For instance, during a school fire, students and teachers might need to disregard normal procedures to ensure safety. A prison riot could allow inmates to act unimpeded, effectively nullifying the environment's normative rules.

A counterargument might be that online social network environments also accommodate contingent events that violate or invalidate the environment's operational rules or allow actions that disrupt behavioral norms, like a participant disturbing a discussion with spam content. However, all actions or occurrences still can only be carried out through the means provided by the platform. One can bend the platform's expected behavioral norms, but one cannot bend the platform itself.[3] Similarly, just as physical laws strictly govern the natural world, the design choices made by the creators of a social network platform establish its operational framework and limit the range of possible actions.

In an online context, our actions are constrained by the system's rules, which, unlike physical laws, are intentionally designed by the platform's creators with specific goals. These goals are closely linked to the profit-driven nature of many platforms, where the primary aim is often to maximize user engagement, which directly translates into increased profits through advertising, data collection, and other monetization forms. This logic of engagement maximization can result in the development of digital environments that, while ostensibly presenting themselves as neutral arenas for communication and interaction, are in fact meticulously engineered to capture and sustain user attention. This design philosophy may prioritize engagement at the expense of other critical values, such as the quality of discourse, the veracity of information disseminated, or the psychological well-being of users.

(b) The second salient feature of online social communication environments is their "density" or "entanglement". This means that it is challenging, if not impossible, to operate within such an environment without inducing effects that are both tracked by the system itself and have an impact on other users. The metaphor of the internet as a (spider) web is instructive in this regard. Being entangled in a spider web means that even the slightest movement causes vibrations that can be felt throughout the entire structure, alerting the spider to potential prey or threats. Similarly, each action in the digital environment generates a ripple effect, impacting the entire network. For instance, posting or sharing a piece of information can alter search engine rankings, influence the user's algorithm, be diffused in other

[3] It should be noted that these dynamics differ for synchronous online communication platforms, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. They incorporate elements of the offline environment, including ambient sounds and physical occurrences captured during the interaction. Such hybrid environments possess unique characteristics and, consequently, distinct affordances that merit separate consideration (Arielli 2020).

people's feed. This interconnectedness means that even minor actions can lead to significant, widespread consequences across the digital landscape. The online environment is "dense" in the sense that no digital action occurs in isolation and escapes algorithmic tracking.

In a social network, we are in turn constantly exposed to information whose visibility has been influenced (or explicitly "curated") by other users' online behavior. In other words, searching for information in a social network is an act that (a) inherently impacts the network itself (based on the user's search behavior), and (b) is not completely separated from the act of sharing or disseminating content. In traditional search engines, information searching and gathering can be conducted independently of public discussion, even though user behavior is also tracked to improve search quality. In social networks, however, the distinction between individually gathering information and spreading it to others becomes blurred. The process of collecting and evaluating news and information is continually integrated into a communicative flow, governed by a system designed to maximize engagement. This has significant implications for the process of knowledge formation, which now primarily occurs through continuous networked interaction rather than individual information search and gathering. One consequence is the tendency to seek confirmation of one's beliefs through interaction, relying on others to validate assertions, especially through sharing, commenting, or "liking" other users' content. As a consequence, epistemic agency within social networks is inherently dependent on the collective and this, in turn, may lead to a reduced feeling of personal accountability. This is what we might call an outsourced (or "crowdsourced") epistemological agency, where individuals or groups delegate the tasks of knowledge acquisition, evaluation, and validation to other subjects or systems, contrary to a direct, personal engagement with the source of knowledge. The outsourcing of epistemic validation could be compared to a diffused reliance on testimony (believing p because someone asserted p), but it often assumes the form of a *preemptive reliance* on testimony. Here, an individual asserts p even though they weakly believe it, relying on the peer group for verification and strengthening of this belief, often just seeking confirmation within an echo chamber of like-minded individuals.

Faced with an assertion spread on an online platform, we often find ourselves unmotivated to research and verify its truthfulness, expecting other readers to do so. At most, we tend to rely on a potential verification effort that we are unwilling to undertake ourselves, assuming it can be delegated to someone else. This behavior partially resembles an epistemological "bystander effect": the presence of many individuals in a group leads one to think they do not need to verify information themselves. We implicitly rely on others to do this verification. This is related to what Wegner (1995) called "transactive memory" in social cognition, which is the tendency to distribute knowledge and the processes of its acquisition across a network of participants, a tendency that intensifies if an agent is densely entangled in a network of communication and exchange with other agents. The tendency to distribute knowledge within a network might lead an individual to believe they possess justified beliefs. However, these apparent beliefs are merely the result of reliance on the network. This is also akin to what Sloman and Fernbach (2017) defined as the "knowledge illusion" phenomenon: we think we know a piece of information, but we actually rely on the conviction that someone else has justified this information. This would be the case, for example, of someone being sure the Bible explicitly forbids abortion but actually relying on peers to confirm this – unjustified and false – belief, since the person never read the Holy Scriptures. In these cases, the sense of community in a densely interconnected network absolves individuals from thinking for themselves. Even the concept of doing "one's own research"—a phrase commonly used within groups that hold anti-establishment views or embrace "alternative truths" contrary to mainstream beliefs—ultimately creates an illusion of knowledge, sustained by references to self-confirming internal sources.

A paradoxical outcome of this is that the longer the chain of information transmission, the more solid the knowledge could be perceived to be, against the common wisdom suggesting that sources closer to the facts should lend more credibility. This impression is given by the fact that many other people validated that content, and each step in the transmission chain is mistakenly seen as a further verification, while it actually consists of acts of sharing passing along the information (Arielli 2018). In the context of social media, a sharer of a post might leave the task of deeper verification of information to the network of connected users, in a diffusion of responsibility that encourages an "outsourced" epistemological verification, where fact-checking is left to the community of other users if the sharer lacks the time or will to confirm the information. But since the other users might keep sharing this partly scrutinized content as well, the task of verification is indefinitely relegated to the network, perpetuating a chain of unverified information.

3 Proxy Agency, or Letting Others Speak for me

The "sharing" function on social media platforms exemplifies a form of indirect communicative and epistemic action. Users who share content allow others' statements to speak

on their behalf, effectively incorporating these external voices into their own discourse. This practice falls under the broader category of indirect agency, where information dissemination occurs "at a distance" through various mediating factors. From an action-theoretic perspective, any action beyond "basic actions" (Goldman 1970; Enç 2003), that is, immediate bodily movements or mental actions (Mele 1997), could be considered "action at a distance", facilitated by tools, physical extensions, or devices.[4] This concept extends from simple actions making use of mechanical tools, like pressing a light switch, to more complex communicative acts, such as writing a message on a piece of paper that is read later by someone else, making use of tools such as paper, ink, and the writing system, which could be considered a "cultural device".

More complex devices enabling distal communicative agency raise interesting questions. Consider a watch: its display of time could be viewed as an assertive speech act, and its alarm function as issuing a command. However, the watch itself is not the communicator, nor is its wearer. While one might argue that such devices merely display information mechanically, like a thermometer, this view is debatable. Unlike natural information sources (e.g., moss on a tree trunk indicating north because it is protected from sunlight), watches and thermometers are intentionally designed to convey specific information. In this sense, the designers and engineers who created these devices are the true assertors of the information they provide.[5]

However, the "sharing" function on social media is more than a distal extension of communication, since it involves not only tools and devices, but also the actions of multiple agents. *Proxy* agency occurs when one agent extends his communicative acts by means of another agent's actions. Consider someone reading aloud a text written by someone else: the reader produces the assertion, but the original communicative act belongs to the author (Kirk 2014; on proxy assertion, see Kirk 2020).[6]

A crucial point of discussion, which cannot be fully explored here, is the current evolution of automated chatbots powered by Large Language Models (LLMs), and artificial agents that act quasi-autonomously within the network, disseminating content, commenting, and reacting to human user activities. If we consider these systems as full-fledged agents, in all cases in which they share or propagate other users' content online we might view their use as a particular and modern application of proxy agency (Arora 2024). Conversely, if we do not grant them agent status, an artificial bot merely disseminating the content of an original human author would merely constitute a more complex form of distal agency. In the case of a chatbot that comments or responds to online posts, the actual speaker—despite the chatbot's apparent autonomy—is the programmer and user who configured the program to interact in specific ways and handle certain types of content. Therefore, a speaker can be held responsible for these linguistic actions (as their originator) even if they did not precisely specify the form of those actions. The development of increasingly autonomous systems capable of communicating and creating texts that go beyond the initial inputs of users and programmers is blurring this distinction (Kroes and Verbeek 2014; Mallory 2023; Symons 2024).

An important aspect of proxy agency is that it need not be conducted through an action where the subject is aware of performing a proxy action. Proxy agency occurs when one agent makes use of or relies on the actions of another agent, who might knowingly or even unknowingly put forth the action of the first one. People can act as agents of proxy agency even without their knowledge. To illustrate with a simple 'offline' example, consider the 'occupied' or 'vacant' sign on a public restroom door (often indicated by a red or green tag). This basic mechanism uses the action of closing or opening the door to communicate the status of the restroom by means of an assertion. This communication is triggered by the user's action of closing the door, but the act of communicating is not performed by them, since it's the maker who embedded this specific assertion within the design of the restroom's locks; they set up a system where current users unknowingly perform the communication.

In the digital context, proxy agency manifests in subtler ways than just by sharing or reposting. For instance, engagement algorithms on social platforms enhance the visibility and perceived importance of content through 'boosting' methods based on user interactions. When someone likes a post, it might be promoted further, influenced by the endorsement it received, potentially reaching more people within the network. In such cases, it becomes challenging to identify the real source of this post—is it solely the author, or does it also include the person who liked and engaged with it, or even the programmer who developed the system? While the act of "sharing" on social media is clearly a deliberate action intended to highlight content, a user might click the "like" button just to express his approval. However,

[4] For general discussion on agency, see the contributions in Ferrero (2022).

[5] One objection might be that a maker or engineer who simply follows a blueprint for a watch without contributing to its innovation does not personally make any assertions through the watch. It could be argued instead that those who developed the watch mechanism or enhanced its design and functionality are the true assertors of the information it provides. This topic is too broad and complex to be addressed within the scope of this paper.

[6] If we keep the idea that a watch generates assertions intended by its maker, checking a watch and telling another person the time is also a proxy communicative action: I am telling the time, but I am doing it by repeating what the watch's maker intended to convey in the design of the watch's mechanism.

many users might not realize that this small gesture actually increases the content's visibility and ranking. Consequently, a "like" can unintentionally extend the reach of the content, making it accessible to a much wider audience. This example demonstrates how users may unknowingly contribute to the propagation of communication flows, much like someone using a restroom is unwittingly activating the 'occupied' sign.

4 Attentional Agency: there is no such Thing as Passive Consumption

As the above-mentioned examples show, the consequence of acting in thoroughly designed and dense environments like online social platforms is that every activity within a social network affects the dissemination of content, whether induced by explicit and intentional actions or by acts inadvertently exploited by the system. The ripple effects generated by our interactions on social platforms are not always the result of intentional and conscious actions, such as deliberate sharing, but are often side effects of other actions (such as liking, opening a post, or commenting on it) of which most users are unaware. Even seemingly passive acts like reading a post, watching a video, and spending time on them can contribute to engagement. Merely being present within the virtual space of a social network can trigger epistemic effects, amplifying content and influencing its distribution across the network itself. The weight of content depends on the degree of relevance attributed to it by the system based on the behavior of interacting agents. For example, I might click on posts or links supporting a conspiracy theory just to see the sources they use, to read the details out of curiosity, or to find weak points to attack in debates. However, this act of reading already shifts the algorithmic network in a direction that activates engagement with this content, so I must be cautious about stepping into sensitive areas within such a network. Even more so if I comment, even critically, or worse, share to denounce the content, as this can increase its engagement.

At the core of this issue is the fact that interactions on social media are meticulously designed, tracked, and analyzed by the system. The actions and interactions of users, including the accounts they follow and engage with, play a crucial role in shaping the content that appears on their feeds. For instance, the TikTok algorithm prioritizes several key elements that determine how content is ranked. These factors include engagement metrics such as likes, shares, saves, comments, and notably, *how long* a video is watched (Carkner 2024). Even the physical location of the user, and the time of day, influence the importance of engagement for specific content. [7] Simply watching a post, and the duration of that viewing, affects how relevant the system deems the post to be, thereby impacting its distribution. The platform views these engagement indicators as evidence that the content is valuable and should be shared with a wider audience. Engaging with a post by commenting or liking can make us partly responsible for its online success. As mentioned, in online settings, everyone is invariably part of the information-generating and distributing process. In some legal contexts or in totalitarian countries, actions like liking a post might lead to negative repercussions for the individual, subjecting them to suspicion not merely because they reveal personal interests or preferences but also because their engagement has contributed to generating wider ripple effects, promoting and supporting the viewed content. The fact that social media ecosystems are dense and entangled makes us unwitting relays and sorters of online content: our mere presence in the digital communication landscape, acting as catalysts, fuels different kinds of engagement mechanisms. Every action and behavior, meticulously tracked and analyzed, influences the distribution of content and impacts the overall epistemic environment of the social media platform.

There are cases where these mechanisms of social media environments are *deliberately* exploited. Users — ranging from marketers and influencers seeking to boost their visibility to activists aiming to advance a cause — might actively engage in practices known as "gaming the algorithm." This involves eliciting or even purchasing likes, comments, and shares to artificially enhance engagement. Paradoxically, the very platforms that these users operate on oppose such tactics because they undermine the authenticity these tools are meant to measure, aiming instead for a spontaneous and genuine depiction of user engagement. This often leads to an "arms race" between platforms that try to identify and suppress artificial engagement tactics and those using them, including third-party companies focused on offering fake followers, enhance engagement (so-called "click farms") or distributing specific content, often aimed at the manipulation of political opinions ("troll farms", De Seta 2017).[8] In the vast market of online content curation, we find both automated systems aimed to boost engagement on social media and, at the opposite side, commercial platforms offering tools for detecting those activities. These tools typically analyze the authenticity of activities by mapping a user's follower base to identify potential bot-like

[7] https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-algorithms/; https://buffer.com/resources/tiktok-algorithm.

[8] "These platforms set up systems to optimize use, then chastise people for using them too well […] The line between legitimate strategic action to boost visibility and illegitimate is nebulous and shifts a lot" https://www.wired.com/story/platforms-gaming-algorithm/.

behavior (Rogers and Niederer 2020). At times, the practice of algorithmic gaming is overtly displayed by users, such as through comments like "Boost" or "Commenting for the algorithm" on videos posted on TikTok. [9] These types of posts introduce an interesting theoretical question: who is the intended audience of these comments? Although they might seem like speech acts, they are not directed at human users. Technically, they should be viewed as merely linguistic triggers designed to influence the platform's algorithmic system.

Overall, what emerges is the delicate balance that platforms must maintain between determining what is the appropriate use of the platform and encouraging engagement through designs that maximize user activity, while also preventing users to opportunistically take advantage of these mechanisms. There is a fine line between platforms *gamifyng* communication (where engagement is stimulated by rewards, based on the accumulation of likes, retweets, shares, scope of impact, etc.; Nguyen 2021) and the tendency to "game" the system with behaviors that make interactions less authentic, subject to mere boosting by both human users and artificial bots. Platforms strive to prevent the deterioration of the quality of the communicative environment they offer, since this could lead to a subsequent loss of appeal of the platform itself. An example is the incentive to comment on a post, and the recent trend of the comments section of platforms like Twitter/X of being overloaded (often by "commenting bots") with content entirely irrelevant to the original post, with the aim to divert the reader's attention to other, often unrelated, content.

Beyond strategic practices of engagement mechanisms with content on social networks, the crucial theorical point is that *there is no such thing as a merely passive consumption in social media without epistemic effects on the environment*: not only does viewing specific content subtly influence personal attitudes and perceptions by means of algorithmic feedback mechanisms, but it also adjusts the visibility and shareability of the content encountered and, more broadly, slightly alters the algorithmic dynamics of the entire network to which they are connected. As such, individual content interactions can significantly impact the content others see, depending on the platform's opaque and continually evolving algorithms. Therefore, even the simple act of *attending* to content fundamentally constitutes an epistemic action that impacts not only the individual viewer but also the engagement metrics of the content itself[10]. Attention (that is, focusing on specific content) is never without effects in online environments (see Citton 2019). Directing attention affects the content being attended to; but we must not forget that attention is not always under our voluntary control and, in many cases, can be captured by systems programmed to solicit our interest and engagement. In this sense, the effects of our 'entangled' presence within the social network can also be induced by acts beyond our conscious control.

5 Strategic Ignoring and the Ethics of self-exposure

Paying attention on social media can have widespread effects on what information spreads and how it's understood. This means that choosing not to engage with certain content can actually influence the social media environment. While our attention can be captured by addictive or eye-catching content, we still have some control over what we focus on. In online spaces, deciding what to pay attention to significantly affects what content becomes popular and how it's received. So, consciously ignoring certain posts or platforms can be seen as a deliberate action to limit the spread of that content. As mentioned before, attention is a mental mechanism that can be partially under our control in terms of our ability to initially decide which content to engage with (Fairweather and Montemayor 2017). However, it's also a mental mechanism that, once in use and active, can be easily held hostage by stimuli programmed to attract our attention. Within the stimulus-dense environment of online platforms, exercising total attentional control is not simple, if not impossible. It's simpler to initially decide not to enter the environment itself.

Inattention is a form of action based on omission, a type of negative action (Silver 2018; on negative agency: Clarke 2014, 2022) that warrants thorough investigation in its own right. The intent here isn't to advocate for the virtue of not paying attention in every contexts, but rather to highlight that this type of act has a specific epistemological value within social network environments and consequently merits detailed conceptual analysis.

Also in offline environments, "not paying attention" can serve to protect the cognitive and mental environment of a person when they decide not to expose themselves to content or discussions they deem useless, harmful, false, or unnecessarily exhausting their attentional and affective resources. However, in online contexts, not paying attention can function to protect both our individual mental environment and the broader online informational landscape. This concept connects with the epistemological topic of "ignorance," not merely as the absence of knowledge, but as an active process of excluding and selecting what to know, both for oneself, as in ignoring, and for others, as in withholding information (Peels 2023). On one hand, actively exercising

[9] https://www.unum.la/blog/drive-engagement-with-tiktok-comments.

[10] Attention could be therefore considered a case of "mental action" (Mele 1997).

ignorance as a strategic mode to exclude information is usually considered a prime example of epistemic vice. McGoey (2019) illustrates how in institutional, political, or economic contexts, choosing to "ignore" or "not know" can be strategic and may have significant economic value within an organization, mainly to protect it from legal liability. On the other hand, strategically choosing to ignore information can also be a legitimate epistemic act that might be beneficial. There are circumstances where it is justified to maintain ignorance, either for oneself or others—for example, to avoid harmful information or to shield a patient from potentially distressing health details that could adversely affect their well-being (Nijsingh 2016). In specific cases, promoting ignorance and avoiding engagement with true information can be useful, especially if the information could lead to dangerous acts (Bostrom 2011).

In online social media contexts, choosing not to engage with specific content or an entire discussion could be a way to protect oneself from toxic or false information. Deliberately ignoring content can be valuable, especially when it concerns misleading, irrelevant, or harmful information that could clutter and disrupt our thinking. A good practice of this selective attention is especially useful in epistemic environments that are rife with poor quality or false information, as well as violent, polarizing, or discriminatory content. Platforms also make use of active disengagement tools to control behaviors that violate the norms of acceptable interaction (Rosen and Lyon 2019): this includes banning users for making inappropriate comments or spreading fake news, implementing so-called "shadowbanning" to limit an account's reach and engagement, or closing them to ensure that potentially harmful content is shielded from the public (Offerdal et al. 2022). The commonly advised strategy to "not feed the troll" in online forums highlights the uselessness of engaging with provocateurs who disrupt communication.

By individually not engaging, we also help preserve the overall quality of the informational environment, since, as we saw, any interaction with content—even merely reading a post or watching a video—can unintentionally amplify it. Ignoring certain information is one way to manage one's own attention and simultaneously protect the online epistemic environment. It represents a form of resistance against situations in which human curiosity and the desire to gather as much information as possible are hijacked by online platforms, counteracting the designs of systems that aim to exploit this curiosity to maximize engagement with specific content. Choosing not to read, watch, or look at content from dubious sources can be crucial for conserving our cognitive resources and managing how we spend them. Consequently, ignoring and not-attending become a virtue for several reasons: it helps us avoid exposure to potentially damaging information, stay clear of toxic epistemic settings, resist systems that aim at our attention and deplete it, and avoid unwittingly contributing to the engagement of certain content.

There is a growing body of literature on digital disengagement practices (Kunstman and Miyake 2019, 2022), "disconnection studies" (Licht 2014; Moe and Madsen 2021), and media abstention research (Portwood-Stacer 2013; Syvertsen 2017). These studies examine what can be seen as a maturation process among users, especially younger ones, towards moderating or even spontaneously limiting their engagement with online platforms (Jorge et al. 2023). Beyond the sociological aspect, this also highlights a conceptual interest in defining the nature of disengagement actions (or "omissions") (for a discussion of definitions and types of disengagement, see Kaun 2021; Nassen et al. 2023). This issue is not only theoretical but also reflects current trends: after the initial popularity of social networks, their use appears to have been declining in recent years up to the period in which the author is writing. People are more cautious about posting their private lives online, profiles are increasingly set to private, and the optimistic vision of a public discussion forum has given way to caution regarding unfiltered communication and the need for tools to protect disseminated information (see James 2023).[11]

Online communication is not only influenced by technical features of digital platforms but also by the fact that, at certain levels of human exchange, informational gain might suffer diminishing returns, while conflictual and confrontational aspects become more pronounced (cf. Avalle et al. 2024). According to this view, continuous exchange and communication do not necessarily help conflict-resolution or truth-finding. On the contrary, the more intensely and rapidly people interact, the higher the risk of polarization and ideological confrontation: exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization (Bail et al. 2018). Digital environments facilitate the intensity of exchanges, often fostering dynamics that are not always contributing to enhance the quality of human interaction and information exchange, such as the development of echo chambers and filter bubbles (Nguyen 2020). Intense interaction leads to what might be described as epistemological "overdrive", where continuous exchanges with individuals holding diverse beliefs necessitate constant renegotiation

[11] "Gartner Predicts 50% of Consumers Will Significantly Limit Their Interactions with Social Media by 2025" (https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2023-12-14-gartner-predicts-fifty-percent-of-consumers-will-significantly-limit-their-interactions-with-social-media-by-2025). "Across social media only 19% of adults share news stories weekly, down from 26% in 2018. Publications like BuzzFeed News, which relied on social distribution, have perished" ("The End of the social network", The Economist, Feb 1st 2024, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2024/02/01/the-end-of-the-social-network).

of shared information. The frequency and intensity of these interactions make it challenging to establish a basis of common knowledge, as every point is relentlessly questioned and dissected in each new interaction by dissenting parties. Social epistemic networks are, therefore, particularly vulnerable (Sullivan et al. 2020). In this context, the idea of "inattention" or "strategic ignorance" is more than just a way to opt out of social media's communicative and knowledge-sharing dynamics. Instead, "non-attending" is seen as a proactive tool of epistemic agency. Rather than simply withdrawing from social media, strategically choosing not to engage in certain digital interactions is a deliberate method to avoid the traps set by attention-grabbing mechanisms inherent in those platforms (Bucher 2020). The exercise of selective engagement affects the process of knowledge production and information circulation that naturally occur as users navigate through these networks.

A theoretical premise that has guided this paper is that an environment (offline or online) does not merely "offer" opportunities to the agents within it, but rather shapes the very agency of those agents. In other words, an agent's actions and behaviors are formed by the characteristics of the environment they operate in. This idea becomes significant when a subject who is used to a particular environment continues to behave the same way in a different environment. This creates a mismatch between the subject's behavior and the new environment. This mismatch also underlies ecological imbalances. In the past, people exploited natural resources without worrying about negative environmental impacts because of their small numbers and limited technology. Today, despite having advanced technology and a larger population, people often continue this exploitative behavior, ignoring the vastly different modern context.

This example highlights that ecological issues can be seen as a disruption of the systemic harmony between an organism and its environment. The balance is disturbed when the "ethical" relationship between behavior and environment is no longer coherent. In this perspective, selective engagement with content on digital platforms can be compared to ethical behavior in natural ecosystems, where every action, no matter how small, has consequences. This includes decisions like how to dispose of waste, our consumption of plastic, or the amount of running water we use. Similarly, in the digital world, even seemingly minor actions such as scrolling through a feed or paying attention to specific content can have significant, network-wide epistemic effects. Just as it is considered ethically sensible to be mindful of our impact on the natural environment, strategic disengagement and selective attention in the digital sphere represent a conscious awareness of how our online behavior influences not only ourselves but also the broader informational ecosystem. There are significant differences between natural environments and (online) epistemic environments that are worth exploring, though they are beyond the scope of this paper. The key argument here is that engaging in online environments requires an awareness of the appropriate type of agency, including moderation or disengagement, which is beneficial in these contexts. Distinguishing between offline and online contexts, as it has been argued, is one step towards better conceptual clarity around the specific types of agency in different communicative and epistemic contexts (for further insights on epistemic environmentalism, see Ryan 2018 and 2021).

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