

Reclaiming Care and Privacy in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

Social media has invaded our private, professional, and public lives. While corporations continue to portray social media as a celebration of self-expression and freedom, public opinion, by contrast, seems to have decidedly turned against social media. Yet we continue to use it just the same. What is social media, and how should we live with it? Is it the promise of a happier and more interconnected humanity, or a vehicle for toxic self-promotion? In this essay I examine the very structure of social media communications in order to sketch how we should engage with social media. Social media communications are, I argue, a public communication of private content. This allows connections to be made with others in ways that would not otherwise be possible; however, it also submits the private to a status competition, which in turn is linked to mental health challenges. A “virtuous” engagement with social media means being aware of these dynamics, and choosing to subordinate social media to other, more important goods.

KEYWORDS:

Social Media – Communication Ethics – Trust – Social Status – Relationships

Nobody today seems to be genuinely indifferent to social media. Some of us are enthusiastic users, posting daily about our personal and professional lives. Others stay away entirely. Yet others are reluctant or ambivalent users. Nonetheless, as varied as attitudes may be, it is clear that we social media provokes reactions in ways that many other technologies – washing machines, for instance – do not.

Long gone are the days when the virtual spaces of the internet were populated by the proverbial nerds and misfits. Today, social media is where success is sought by politicians, corporations, and professionals of all stripes. Likes and followers have become a currency that can be converted into power, revenue, or prestige. Even in academia – that traditionally ivory-tower community – likes and followers are increasingly chased, as evidence mounts that they lead to citations, and hence funding and job opportunities (Luc et al. 2020).

There is something disturbing about the way social media is transforming our private, professional, and public lives. A recent Pew survey showed that 64% of U.S. adults believe that social media have a mostly negative impact on society, *six times* than the 10% who were optimistic (Auxier 2020). The cited reasons mainly concern misinformation, harassment, hate, polarization, and echo chambers. Such opinions are now shaping public discourse. For instance, some politicians have taken to openly blaming social media platforms for promoting misinformation and vaccine hesitancy (*BBC News* 2021).

One of the most worrying consequences concerns mental health. Teenagers are vulnerable, and especially teenage girls. Between 2000 and 2015, the suicide rate for teenage girls doubled, with two thirds of that rise occurring between 2010 and 2015 alone. Jean Twenge and colleagues (2018) point to the introduction of the smartphone as the turning point: with that invention, social media could be accessed anytime and anywhere, just as long as one hand was free.

Such challenges underline just how novel the social media environment is for a social species such as ours. For the overwhelming part of our history, we gossiped or joked with a relatively small number of people. In fact, according to anthropologists, our cognition cannot handle much more than about 150 social relationships (Dunbar 1992). By contrast, on social media our banter and bragging reaches thousands or even

millions. Social media has taken root in our evolved desire for community, then twisted it in new ways. For instance, psychologists notice how social media intensifies comparisons between one's own social status and that of others (J.-L. Wang et al. 2017) and promotes expressions of outrage (Brady et al. 2021).

How should we respond to these novel challenges? One approach is to seek reform of the social media environment, in order to reduce the challenges that users structurally face. Calls for privacy protection can be situated in this approach, as can proposals to make platforms less addictive, or to design other types of reaction to posts in order to reduce the anger and rage that can otherwise so easily flourish on social media platforms (Tanesini, this volume). The other approach adopted in in this essay (but also by e.g. Vallor 2016) will focus on how users can adopt more appropriate responses to the social media environment. Given the structural challenges on social media, how can users better direct their agency? In effect, as expanded on later, this involves a virtue ethics of social media.

This essay's main message will be to bring attention to what I argue is the most fundamental structural challenge on social media: the intertwining of the private and the public in new and often deceptive ways. I will link this to some of the problems concerning social media's impact on mental health, but will aim to sketch how structural and unavoidable the public vs. private ambiguity is on social media.

This is the rationale to consciously reclaim space for the private aspects of our lives, as well as have practical wisdom to guide communication on social media. This task requires a certain detachment from the attitudes of "hype and disappointment" that new technologies often provoke. It can be helpful therefore to digress briefly into how another technology also once transformed our daily lives, our communities, and even our sense of self: the automobile.

1. Technology and the Flux of Public Opinion. In one of the opening scenes from *The Wind in the Willows*, a children's novel from 1908, an encounter with a "motor-car" is described in almost transcendent terms:

"... the magnificent motor-car, immense, breath-snatching, passionate, with its pilot tense and hugging his wheel, possessed all earth and air for the fraction of a second, flung an enveloping cloud of dust that blinded and enwrapped them

utterly, and then dwindled to a speck in the far distance...” (Grahame and Hunt 2010, 22)

This encounter has an immediate polarizing effect. It provokes a complete transformation in Toad, one of the central characters (an anthropomorphized upper-class English gentleman), who becomes entirely obsessed with motor-cars. By contrast, Rat is scandalized by the occurrence¹.

Toad’s adulation of cars was not merely a comic invention, but a parody of a general attitude in the early 20th century. Historians report how the car initially was imbued with all sorts of symbolic value: individual freedom, or the promise to make cities cleaner and quieter (Flink 1972). The rival technologies of the railways and horses were associated with corruption and harmful monopolies, or with major burdens on quality of life. Horse-drawn carriages made a lot of noise (from the iron wheels and iron horse shoes hitting cobble stones), parking them required a lot of space, and removing horse excreta from the streets was a daily chore and expensive. Dried remains of such excreta turned into what was called “street dust”, which caused various respiratory diseases. Such was the draw of removing horses from public streets that one of the leading automobile periodicals of the era was termed *The Horseless Age* (Flink, 1972, p. 453). Due to this perceived potential, there was collective enthusiasm about cars: “press coverage was overwhelmingly favourable; laws regulating the motorcar were overly lenient” (Flink, 1972, p. 454).

However, not all were like Toad – a sizable minority sided with Rat. There were those who blamed the technology for a range of social ills: “increased sexual promiscuity, a decline in church attendance and the breakdown of the family and neighborhood solidarity” (Flink, 1972, p. 460). It seems that few could be genuinely indifferent towards the automobile, as is the case with social media today.

By the late 1950s public consciousness of the automobile had reached what could be called a “mature” stage. Public spaces were no longer maximally sacrificed to cars. Issues regarding safety and pollution were also no longer disregarded. Thus, in the U.S. context for instance, laws on both air pollution and vehicle safety were passed in 1965 and 1966 respectively (Flink, 1972, pp. 469-470).

¹ “You villains!’ he shouted, shaking both fists, ‘You scoundrels, you highwaymen, you – you – road-hogs!* – I’ll have the law on you! I’ll report you! I’ll take you through all the Courts!’” (Grahame and Hunt 2010, 23)

Today, cars remain status symbols for many and an obsession for a minority. However, collectively we are more acutely aware of the downsides of cars compared to a century ago. They are loud and a danger to vulnerable pedestrians. They pollute and take up large tracts of public space. The gentrification of inner cities starting in the 1960s and accelerating in the decades afterwards (cf. Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2013) reflects how many prefer not having long daily commutes by car. The high real estate prices in leafy, quiet neighbourhoods reflect the undesirability of busy roads. In cities, pedestrianized zones have been promoted as a way to reclaim public space from cars (Gallo and Marinelli 2020).

2. Between hype and disappointment. Like the automobile before it, social media seems to be going through a “hype-disappointment cycle” (Borup et al. 2006). Today disappointment seems to dominate. However, not too long ago social media was hyped: it was supposed to transform democracies, turning citizens from passive consumers into active participants, and allowing the oppressed to connect and organize (Loader and Mercea 2011). The Arab Spring and Euromaidan Revolution were seen as early confirmations of this view. And not just politics, but also science was supposedly going to be revolutionized by social media’s facilitation of free-flowing information (Bartling and Friesike 2014).

One overinflated expectation is the promise of how social media was going to transform our *social life*. Consider one of Facebook’s earliest mission statements (from 2008):

Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life. (Reagan 2009)

The use of the definite article – “*the* people in your life” – gives the mission statement an unmistakably intimate ring. You are not connecting and sharing with “people” in the generic, but with your family and friends, whom you need and who need you. Social media was going to be a tool for maintaining intimate friendships and caring communities, even while at a physical distance.

This taps into a deep-seated human desire for community. It may have been what led to the vast adoption of social media, going from 5% of adults in 2005 to 72%

in 2020 in its initial U.S. market (Pew 2021). However, it clearly has also led to deep disappointment.

First of all, since social media thrives on the desire for social approval, many users tend to communicate “idealized selves” (Harris and Bardey 2019) – also termed an *avatar* (e.g. Brunskill 2013) or a *curated self* (Hogan 2010). We seem to distort basic features of our personality on social media. For instance, introverts often attempt to appear to be (much) more extraverted online than they are in offline life (Harris and Bardey 2019, 11). This strongly contrasts with the way social media is promoted by corporations as a vehicle for empowerment and self-expression.

Dating platforms are where idealized self-presentation is at its most intense (though unsurprisingly so). Users not only touch up their profile photograph, but also mispresent height, weight, or age (Toma and Hancock 2010; Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs 2006). The vast increase in partner choice, far from representing an increase in freedom or autonomy, seems to promote the “fear of missing out” in users. It can even trigger a “rejection mind-set”, where even good potential partners are rejected in the hope of finding someone “better” (Pronk and Denissen 2020). Instead of promoting free choice, dating platforms stimulate us to *rank* potential partners more than we otherwise would. This commodification of romantic partners seems to be a draining process, and researchers speak of “Tinder fatigue” or “dating burnout” (see Pronk and Denissen 2020).

Rankings did not originate with social media. Status hierarchies exist across many animal species (L. Ellis 1995). However, social media does seem to have added a new twist, where we identify with the success of *online* personas. For instance, our social media following is rapidly become part of who we are in society (Harris and Bardey 2019, 9). The result is that we, in the words of the psychiatrist David Brunskill, identify with a “socially-derived and socially-driven composite online image” (Brunskill 2013), to the detriment of genuine self-awareness.

A specific mechanism by which social media can lead to harm is that it promotes *competitive* communication. We compete in order to capture attention, likes, and affirmation; the winners are rewarded with status. This leads to social media users engaging in what researchers call “upward social comparison”, where users compare themselves to people they perceive as “superior” (Wheeler 1966; Vries et al. 2018; Schmuck et al. 2019). This upward social comparison has clear negative impact on the subject’s self-esteem and well-being (J.-L. Wang et al. 2017).

So should we just conclude that social media is harmful for our mental health? Such a blanket generalization seems to be difficult to make. Not everybody engages in upward social comparison. Some users report *more* positive feelings after viewing a positive post. This is a form what is called “emotional contagion”: instead of feeling inferior due to other’s successes, some feel genuinely happy (Vries et al. 2018).

Nonetheless, even if only a fraction of users develop serious mental health consequences from social media, this is still significant. Compare this to an epidemic of viral infections. A virus may only provoke very mild symptoms in the vast majority of a population, but even if it “only” kills 1% of all infected, this can still lead to a dramatic population-level effect. Similarly, even if only a small minority is driven to depression and even suicide (Twenge et al. 2020), this is still sufficient to warrant a rethink in how we approach social media.

Ultimately, it is darkly ironic that a technology designed to “connect and share with the people in your life” should have such pernicious effects on *anyone*. According to the interpersonal theory of suicide (Van Orden et al. 2010; Joiner 2005), suicidal desire is caused by two beliefs. The first is that one no longer “belongs”, which is taken to refer to feelings of loneliness and the absence of reciprocally-caring relationships. The second is the belief that one is a “burden” on others: the belief that one’s self is a liability to others, and self-hatred. Hence, apparently, when some use a technology in an attempt to be “more connected” and to “share more”, they experience the feeling that they feel that they do not “belong” and that they are a “burden” on others.

3. The role of ethics. The type of approach offered by ethics can be contrasted with the predominant response among policymakers or corporations: to draw up measures to *protect* users. Sometimes it is the government that is called upon to take action (e.g. Udorie 2015). At other times it is the corporate owner of social media platform (e.g. Miller 2018). For instance, one of the very first protective policies is the ability to set privacy controls (Keys 2018). These increase the control of users *whom* a social media post is shared with – whether a post is “more” or “less” public.

Privacy controls have been around on a platform such as Facebook since 2008, that is, before the observed uptick in mental health problems related to social media. One might therefore be sceptical about whether they go to the heart of the problem. Another far more controversial – but also more thought-provoking – proposal is to remove the feature of “likes” from social media platforms. This, it is argued, minimizes

upward social comparison and addictiveness (Miller 2018). Or in the words of one executive: removing likes will “remove the pressure of how many likes a post will receive, so you can focus on sharing the things you love” (Deguara 2019).

Would users even *want* the likes on their posts to not be visible? Would removing likes resolve the problems associated with upward social comparison and competitive communication? Nobody currently knows for sure, but in the following sections I sketch some reasons to be sceptical: social media communication is public and is inevitably competitive; introducing privacy controls or even removing likes will not change this.

This is not an argument *against* the need to protect users, even from themselves. Just look at the history of the automobile: at some point, the government needed to step in and *mandate* the use of seat-belts – in the UK, an initial law was passed in 1981 (for drivers and front-seat drivers only: UK Parliament 1981). Similarly, it sounds eminently sensible that social media applications should be redesigned as to be less addictive (Miller 2018). My argument is that policy measures should occur in tandem with a general change in user attitudes.

Such a change may happen without any conscious effort, through letting the hype-disappointment cycle play out. However, this may take years or even decades. In the meantime, an ethics of social media can help us navigate social media environments.

When I use the word “ethics” here, I do not have in mind a system of rules and judgments which guide our moral approbation, but the more Aristotelian sense of the art of living: to act *appropriately*. This sense of ethics has only an indirect link with utilitarian principles such as avoiding harm to others, or with principles of duty such as respecting others. The classic example of an Aristotelian virtue is courage. Attempting a summit of the Mount Everest may be courageous for a professional alpinist, but would most likely be a form of recklessness for an armchair philosopher, resulting from a lack of self-knowledge and perhaps arrogance.

One particularly instructive dimension of this Aristotelian sense of ethics is the requirement to attach the “right amount” of importance to social realities. Here Aristotle speaks not of status or popularity as we might do today, but of “honour”. Aristotle deemed honour to be of more value than wealth or power, but even then, he claimed that the virtuous person “does not care much even about honour” (*Nicomachean Ethics 1124 a1*).

Similarly, a virtuous engagement with social media could be thought of as not caring too much (or too little) about social media success, but subordinating it to other, more important goods. It is in this sense that “indifference” should be understood. Just as the automobile lost its romance at some point in the 1950s, paving the way for subordinating the technology to safety and clean air, it would be desirable if most of us could, one day, achieve a similar “virtuous boredom” with social media.

4. Relational trust on social media. To achieve a little more clarity on the nature of social media interactions, consider the following recognizable type of social media communication. Imagine some acquaintance posting about having gone on a holiday on an exotic island, replete with pictures of him or her laughing with friends, having a good time, and doing adventurous activities. Call this person, for the sake of convenience, “Rich Acquaintance B”. The user who sees the post is “Poor Person A”.

Do you “trust” B? In one sense, you probably do trust B: you trust that they have told the truth. After all, your first assumption would probably not be that B has entirely fabricated the photos. However, in another, deeper sense, you don’t trust B. Some philosophers distinguish a type of “trust” where you trust a person if you believe that person has a benevolent attitude or “good will” towards you (following Baier 1986). For instance, you may trust your mother in this fundamental sense. Even though you may doubt her competence in some domain or even her truthfulness in some situations (e.g., she may tell you a white lie), you would still agree that you trust her because you know she *cares* about you, in some general, unqualified sense. This lack of qualification is related to the “unquestioning” aspect of some of the most basic forms of trust (Nguyen, forthcoming): the care is directed to a person as a whole, and is not dependent on either competence or the nature of the task at hand (contrast with Hawley 2014). The expectation of care is closely related to what we sometimes call the “unconditional trust” we place in our family members, or close friends.

For future reference, let us call this deeper sense of trust, “relational trust”. My concern is what social media does to relational trust. Interestingly, and not coincidentally, Facebook’s early mission statement can be read as an indirect promise of relational trust to its users, to “connect and share with the people in your life”. However, does this promise make sense, given the nature of the social media environment?

Let us return to the example with this concept of relational trust: does the post of Rich Acquaintance B help promote the relational trust that Poor Person A may place in B? In other words, does the communication help bring across that B cares about A? The answer seems to be: not particularly. To see this, imagine the same communication in a private setting. Imagine that B met with A privately. Would B then still communicate with the same transparency about their exotic holiday? If B cared about the well-being of A, then, knowing that A could not afford the holiday, B would likely downplay the news. Instead of mentioning the spearfishing expedition, B might complain about the hotel instead, or emphasize how nice it was to be back home. The communication would have been shaped by the value of relational trust: B cares about A, and thus wants to preserve the relational trust that A has in B, even if B is only an acquaintance.

This illustrates how private communications are governed by norms that (at least currently) seem to be absent on social media. B may post about an exotic holiday without being considered particularly inconsiderate, self-centred, or mean-spirited. Is this because social media is public, rather than private communication?

5. Private versus public. To say that a communication is “private” does not mean it is “secret”. My conversations with a romantic partner may be private, but I may not put any particular effort into keeping them secret. Governments keep secrets: they expend considerable effort in preventing certain information from becoming public. By contrast, most of my private communications are hardly a secret. If someone would wish to know the mundane details of my life, my response would be closer to indifferent bemusement rather than to one of betrayal or indignation.² What is private about such communications lies not in the content of the communication, but in the *manner* in which that content is communicated. I might be slightly embarrassed if my terms of endearment were to become public knowledge. If I knew other people were listening in, I would likely craft my message in a different way.

As another example of a distinctively private communication, consider telling a bad joke to a good friend. If you were to broadcast the same bad joke on national television, you might feel a mixture of shame and embarrassment – perhaps because

² Note that it is precisely this attitude which underlies the “nothing to hide argument” in support of surveillance programmes (cf. e.g. Cofone 2020). We may not deem our private information worthy of being kept secret, but third parties can nonetheless find ways to abuse it .

the joke was in poor taste, or perhaps because it was just not very funny. Yet, in the context of a 1-to-1 conversation, the bad joke may have been entirely appropriate. You know that the good friend will appreciate the joke, and you know that only the good friend will hear it.

To generalize, a *private communication* can be understood as a message that is conveyed by one person with the intention that a *specific* person is the receiver. By contrast, a *public communication* is a non-private one: a message conveyed *without* any specific receiver in mind. Political communications, meant for all citizens of a country, are one of the most indiscriminate public communications. However, public communications can also target a *type* of receiver. For instance, scientific publications are written for an audience of scientific peers. They are not crafted with the general public mind, but at the same time neither are they private communications. Once there is any degree of uncertainty (in one's intention) as to who precisely will receive a communication, then the communication can be said to be public.

Private and public communications are (often unconsciously) structured by different social norms. Private communications typically take place in trusting relationships, and aim to enhance relational trust rather than merely to convey information about a state of affairs. The bad joke is not told for its information content, but is told knowing that the good friend will appreciate that bad joke, and hence that the bad joke can give pleasure. Similarly, by saying "rainy day, isn't it?" to your neighbour, your intention is not to convey information about the meteorological state of affairs, but to create a (weak) bond by acknowledging a common challenge or common experience. The absurdity of a government issuing a communiqué "rainy day, isn't it?" – let alone a social media user posting the same message as a status update – underlines just how different the norms governing private communications are from those governing public communications.

Communication, in general, is not always simply about the transmission of information content about causal states of affairs, like whether snow is white. Communication can serve to transmit information about the sender's view of his or her relationship with the receiver, including what value or status is ascribed to the receiver. This is partially why we make small talk, or communicate tautological propositions or make observations that are clear for everybody: to convey that we *care* about the other person because we deem them worthy of being spoken to.

Given this analysis, it is quite clear that online communication on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on) has a *public* character. However, this public character is often not obvious, and not only because of the mission statements of social corporations couched in terms such as “caring” and “sharing”. The public character of social media communication is often hidden because a lot of the content is private. If I post something about my dog, then that is “private content” in the sense that it is not particularly of “public interest”. Before the advent of social media, gatekeepers such as journalists or editors would have screened away content about my dog (unless it bit me). With social media, we can broadcast information that does not make any obvious contribution to a common good, such as the state of scientific knowledge or the advancement of a political debate. As an academic, I can post my latest articles to Twitter, but I can also share what I happened to see on my afternoon run.

Not all social media platforms stimulate the sharing of private content to the same degree. Facebook seems more geared to sharing private content than Twitter is. This seems to be reflected in how, for instance, politicians gravitate towards Twitter as a forum for their public communications (Silva and Proksch 2021). One could also ask whether the confusion of private and public is inevitable. As used by some politicians, Twitter can come to resemble a kind of newsletter or bulletin-board, where the posted content is carefully curated in light of political goals. Where the confusion of private and public is more obvious is, for instance, in the communications by celebrities of the minutiae of their daily activities. If I see what Cristiano Ronaldo had for breakfast, or the loving attention he shows his children, I may be tempted to feel a misplaced connection with him as if he were a friend of mine. All this information draws me into the orbit of his life. However, he is not my friend, so how does the information really contribute to the good of *my* life? If service to a common good were a criterion for posting to Instagram, it would not be known beyond a closed circle of friends what some celebrity had for dinner or wore to a party. It is in this way that the private and public are confused on social media: private content is communicated publicly but in such a way that gives users the impression that the communication is private, feeding into the misplaced expectation that they can find friendship-like trust and intimacy on social media.

Are we entirely unaware of the public character of social media? Probably not. It would seem strange to post “rainy day, isn’t it” to social media, or to share a terrible joke. The fact that we are disinclined to post about today’s weather illustrates how, at

some level, we at least sometimes make the distinction between public and private communication. However, we often confuse the distinction, both when we post ourselves and when we read others' posts. We share private content without tailoring it to a particular intended receiver.

The concept of “context collapse” can be useful in clarifying just how public and private relate here (Frost-Arnold 2021; boyd 2011).³ Context collapse refers to how a particular message can be appropriate for one social group (within certain shared background assumptions), but inappropriate for another. It is seen as a misuse or ill-advised use of social media that is to be avoided. And the public vs. private distinction involves at least two contexts. A private communication is highly contextual insofar as its content is tailored to a *known* receiver, and governed by norms of relational trust. When this content is broadcast publicly, there is a kind of context collapse.

However, the context collapse is of a special kind. On the one hand, users usually are spontaneously led by different norms than in private communications. Hence, if private content is broadcast publicly, it is *recontextualized* to the extent that it is rephrased to adopt the contours of a public communication. On the other hand, the recontextualization is not complete, insofar as the content of the communication stubbornly evokes expectations more appropriate to private contexts (for instance, by being irrelevant for the common interest). Thus, the sender may have the misguided expectation that the receivers were motivated by relational trust. Or, the receiver may likewise have the misguided expectation that the sender was motivated by relational trust, and when this expectation is disappointed, reactions of anger or diminished self-worth can ensue.

Hence, if one were to rephrase the argument in terms of context collapse, social media communication involves a *partial* decontextualization and a *partial* recontextualization of private communication. Another distinctive feature of this kind of context collapse is that it is not an unfortunate misuse of social media, but rather a fundamental property of social media communication. In this respect, the ambiguous context collapse involved with the blurring of private and public is not like the context collapse present in the inadvertent quote or the ill-advised attempt at humour. Without the ambiguity between private and public contexts, social media loses its distinctive character and becomes like an electronic bulletin board, only containing

³ My thanks to Jon Webber, Oresmis Palestos, and Alessandra Tanesini for enquiring about this connection.

announcements of public interest. The challenge for the user is to engage with ambiguous context collapse in a virtuous way (see later).

6. The dangers of suppressing the private.

As a result, aspects of one's private life become grist to the mill of *status competition*. Status is the rank that persons ascribe to each other, such that persons can be, at least to a certain extent, slotted into "status hierarchies". Wealth, fame, or ability are some of the most central indicators. In the online environment status is, more or less, indicated by number of followers or likes.

It is entirely unsurprising that we use social media as a tool for status competition. The human concern for social status is sometimes listed as one of the possible "human universals": we seem to care about status regardless of our gender, culture, age, or personality (Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015). Put a group of strangers into a room together, give them a task, and within minutes they will sort themselves into some kind of status hierarchy. Our caring about status is also not capricious. Status has very real impacts on our lives, and is ultimately correlated with health outcomes and even mortality rates (Wilkinson 2001; Marmot 2005).

Here it is crucial to distinguish between benevolent and perverse forms of status competition. Anthropologists sometimes distinguish between "prestige" and "dominance" (Henrich and Gil-White 2001). The former comes from competence, ability, or a valuable service that benefits the community as a whole. The latter refers to the threat of violence: physical violence, but also alliance-formation, bullying, intimidation, or manipulation.⁴ Most human societies try to keep perverse forms of status-seeking at bay (Price and Van Vugt 2014; Desmond 2020b; 2021).

What type of status competition does social media seem to promote? Status in the social media environment, measured by likes or follower counts, seems to interact with status in the broader society in several ways. On the one hand, offline status is often converted to online status. Humans upvote appearances of competence and service. They also upvote appearances of power: a U.S. president will typically

⁴ This dichotomy, while sufficient for purposes here, is oversimplified. Often prestige and dominance are intertwined in the offline world. For instance, those higher up on the corporate ladder may be more competent and thus may have high "prestige"; however, their position may also give them the power to hire and fire, promote and demote others. For a discussion, see (Henrich and Gil-White 2001; Chapais 2015).

command a large following by virtue of their position of power. In other words, both prestige and dominance can be converted into likes and followers. However, online status follows its own dynamic, and can be in turn be converted into prestige and dominance. A large following (think of social media influencers) can translate into wealth and influence.

However, status competition on social media seems closest to the dynamic of a popularity contest, which has been mainly studied in groups of children. Popular children impact what types of behaviour become social norms in classrooms, and they are typically in demand as a friend (W. E. Ellis and Zarbatany 2007). However, bullying also apparently increases a child's popularity (Redhead, Cheng, and O'Gorman 2018, p. 3). Popularity is thus an ambiguous status measure – with similarities to both prestige and dominance.

Is social media enticing adults to enter popularity competitions – or other forms of perverse status competition? While more could be said about this than space permits, this competitive aspect of social media can help make sense of just how social media's confusion between private and public ultimately has corrosive effects on mental health. Private content has its “natural place” in intimate contexts – friendships, romantic relationships – that are far away from the public eye, but with social media it is made public and submitted to competitive dynamics.

7. Social Media Virtues. In the past decade, we have gone from adulation to demonization of social media, but collectively we have not yet done much conscious searching for a golden mean. Perhaps the hype-disappointment cycle will play out of its own accord. However, there is also reason to believe social media to be more insidious than previous technologies. Social media attaches to our desire for community and thus plays with our sense of identity. It takes events and emotions from the intimate sphere and feeds them into the arena of public status competition, often without us realizing.

Some of this balance may simply involve not spending too much time on social media. In an experiment where groups of students deactivated Facebook for four weeks, not only did disconnecting increase well-being remarkably, but it also affected the users' priorities, is well illustrated by one student's comment:

I was way less stressed. I wasn't attached to my phone as much as I was before. And I found *I didn't really care so much about things that were happening [online] because I was more focused on my own life ... I felt more content.* I

think I was in a better mood generally. I thought I would miss seeing everyone's day- to-day activities ... I really didn't miss it at all. (Allcott et al. 2020, 655, my emphasis)

What this participant is suggesting is that what was so beneficial was not the *limiting* of time on social media, but rather the *proper prioritization* of values or activities in his life. In particular, taking time away from social media allowed it to be *subordinated* to other activities that were clearly experienced as more central to the students' own lives and better for their well-being.

However, the public and competitive nature of social media communication is inevitable, regardless of how many privacy controls are instated, or whether likes are suppressed. The challenge therefore lies in finding ways to engage with this public, competitive character of social media in a virtuous way. Part of the response here surely lies in reforming the social media environment, in order to safeguard privacy and redirect competition. Thus, social media corporations have established forms of social status that are not brute popularity (e.g., "blue checks" in Twitter), and proposals to introduce less anger-promoting interfaces (e.g., Tanesini, this volume) can help as well. Both help redirect the popularity competition towards more desirable values.

However, virtuous action presupposes user discretion in choosing the response, and thus a freedom to act inappropriately – precisely something that a policy response seeks to avoid. So how should we choose appropriately? Here the type of care shown by professionals is a useful model for ethical interactions on social media. A good physician, architect, engineer, or psychologist will care about their patient or client – but not in the exact same way a parent cares about their child. There is no prior intimate dyadic relationship that grounds the care. Professional care thus does not involve relational trust and cannot be called "personal" in the way, for instance, filial care can. Instead, professional care reflects how the professional believes some standard of competent service to be valuable for the community (for more on professionalism, see Desmond 2020a). Professional care shows how care can be relatively impersonal (indeed, a professional and their client may largely remain strangers to each other) and not necessarily involve the feelings of love that are often associated with care.⁵

⁵ For instance, Vallor defines "technomoral care" as "a skillful, attentive, responsible, and emotionally responsive disposition to personally meet the needs of those with whom we share our technosocial

Professional ethics is a useful analogy for thinking about social media because it points to a type of *care* that is appropriate outside of a merely private context. Interacting “with care” on social media, at first approximation, means communicating something valuable for others, despite being uncertain about who the receiver will be and what their needs are. Especially given the dangers of misguided expectations of relational trust, both senders and receivers of messages on social media could evaluate their own and others’ communications according to the a standard of what is valuable for others. A sender may ask, does this message contribute to others’ lives? A receiver may ask, does this message contribute to my life? If the answer is no, the message may be merely grist to the mill of online popularity competition, and therefore should be disregarded.

However, the analogy with professional care breaks down in considering how social media’s unique integration of private content within public communication. For instance, a psychiatrist may share their opinions about the latest DSM on social media in a way they would never do during consultation. Indeed, to opine in this way to a patient could be a breach of professional ethics; yet, the very same content could constitute a virtuous use of social media. It can be of genuine interest to others to hear about these opinions. So, unless social media is to be reduced to an electronic bulletin board consisting of formal communication only , it should be possible for individuals to share their private thoughts, emotions, or actions in a way that is of genuine interest and value to others. In sum, sharing private content on social media can be a genuine form of care.

How precisely can we know if we are behaving in a proper “caring” way? That is a different question.⁶ My point here is to bring attention to care as a basic way of orienting one’s online agency towards what is *valuable to others*. This is not a form of self-sacrificial altruism, but rather a prerequisite for online *flourishing*. If one’s primary concern is for others, one is liberated from the need to receive instantaneous

environment” (Vallor 2016, p. 138-9). This definition of technomoral care is appropriate for the examples of technologically-aided nursing she seems to have in mind. However, the concept of care is too personal to be applicable for social media interactions. Social media interactions are emotionally thin interactions (limited to a short text supplemented perhaps with emoticons), are not necessarily skillful, nor are they typically directed to the needs of specific persons. My thanks to Alessandra Tanesini for enquiring about this connection.

⁶ For instance, sharing private information can become an expression of narcissism rather than of care. How can we know that we are sharing virtuously, and not viciously? If the virtue ethics of social media is like other forms of virtue ethics, there is no general answer to this question. How to act with care can only be judged in particular situations, through *phronesis*.

affirmation from others. Care for others helps avoid the dangers of increased anxiety or commodification of one's own identity.

At the level of policy, virtue ethics emphasises the primary importance of *education*. This is education for virtuous living – *paideia* (Aristotle, *Politics*, book VIII) – rather than education that merely aims at marketable skills or at intellectual knowledge for its own sake. What would this education look like? Based on the considerations of this essay, it would seek to raise awareness (especially among adolescents) about the public nature of social media, how social media communications are often competitive, and how this can impact a person's self-esteem. It would reveal what we know about our evolved psychology, and its sensitivity to status. It would warn of popularity competitions, and explain the importance of more benevolent types of status. It would emphasise that, as public communication, social media is best used not for seeking relational trust and signals that others care, but rather for broadcasting messages of value to one's wider social network.

By contrast, if one wishes to receive consolation or affirmation, then one should seek out friends or family. In this way, habits of care with regard to social media interaction seem also to depend on realizing what social media *cannot* give us: the joys we experience with private, intimate, offline communication. If the collective realization of the joy of walking without having to worry about large, heavy metallic objects moving at high speeds gave rise to the growth of pedestrianized zones, similarly the joy of privacy and intimacy may give rise to social media-free zones in life. By helping users to adopt a wider perspective both on the nature of social media and even their own "nature", social media education may help instil healthy habits, and thus a durable and effective response to some of the mental health challenges facing social media users today.

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