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The Appearance of Authority in Health and Wellbeing Media: Analysing Digital Guru Media through Lacan's 'big Other'

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Introduction

Alongside the increasing popularity of digital, 'social' media platforms, has been the emergence of self-styled digital life-coaches, many of whom seek to propagate their knowledge of and interests in a variety of topics through online social networks (such as, Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, etc.). With many of these 'social influencers' garnering a large online following, their popularity, social significance and cultural impact offers important insights into the place and purpose of the subject in our digital media environment.[1]

Accordingly, this chapter will consider the proliferation of digital media technologies, which, on the one hand, propose the dissolution of the subject (wearable technology, technological singularity, etc.), while on the other, provide new opportunities for discovering, 'sharing' and/or improving one's 'inner-Self' (digital media gurus, online health and fitness regimes, etc.). It is in considering how the effects of this 'digital subject' redefines traditional (Cartesian) conceptions, that the relative significance of DGM can be drawn.

When assessing this significance, however, it remains important that academic discussions do not resort to easy laudations of online/digital culture, which commend its apparent capacity to subvert essentialised conceptions of the subject (Haraway, 1991); nor should the emergence of DGM, and their accompanying swathe of online fans and devotees, be seen as simply promulgating a narcissistic account of social media use. Instead, this chapter will seek to echo Hills's (2014) contention that one must engage with the 'potential ambivalences' of social media platforms, and the 'gurus' and users who frequent them. To this end, the following discussion will seek to explore how the DGM both demonstrates and accentuates the potential problems and benefits

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[1] Broadly defined, 'social influencers' are individuals who have knowledge on, or, experience of, a particular topic, which they share via social media platforms. Through online channels, influencers can obtain large fan bases.

that underscore the digitalization of society and the Self (Dean, 2002, 2010; Flisfeder, 2015). In particular, explicit attention will be given to examining how our engagements with social media can be considered in relation to Lacan's (2002) notion of the big Other and its relevance in introducing, examining and, possibly, subverting, the digital media guru. It is to this, we now turn.

The digital big Other

According to Lacan (1991), the process of subjectivization is one based upon our relation with the big Other (also referred to as the 'Other'), which serves as the arbiter of our social activity (Grosz, 1990). Primarily, the Other is that necessary party that ensures the functioning of our social interactions (Dolar, 2012). Chiesa confirms:

> the big Other may be equated with: (a) *language* as a structure (as in structural linguistics); (b) *the symbolic order* as the legal fabric of human culture (in accordance with Lévi-Strauss's anthropology); (c) *the Freudian unconscious* as reformulated by Lacan in his widely promoted return to its original, subversive signification. (2007, p.35).

However, what remains central to the importance of the big Other is its capacity to maintain a certain 'symbolic efficiency' (Wood, 2012). That is to say, notable social 'performances' – such as holding the door for an elderly relative; saying 'please' and 'thank you'; or, offering to pick-up the bill at a restaurant – are all performed by the subject in view of the Other. These 'performances' proffer a minimal consistency in our day-to-day activities. Furthermore, the big Other is not just apparent in formal pleasantries but can also constitute a 'Wall' between the Self and other (Žižek, 2002). While this 'Wall' allows for fantasies of the other to be created, it also helps to ensure that a certain 'distance' in relations is maintained; a 'proper distance' from which the other's proximity is managed (Žižek, 2002).

Importantly, the subject's relation to the big Other is one that follows a process of 'symbolic castration', characterized by the subject's acquisition of the Other's language (Wood, 2012). Here, the subject remains marked by a 'split' between their own imaginary fantasies (the imaginary order) and a symbolic register – the realm of language (the symbolic order) – which forever fails to meet the subject's intentions. It

is in relation to the big Other's naïve observations that 'we sacrifice direct access to our bodies and, instead, are condemned to an indirect relation with it via the medium of language' (Myers, 2003, p.97). Consequently, though the big Other remains separate to the subject, it maintains a level of ex-sistence in the subject's experiences, interactions and, more importantly, in constituting its sense of Self (Žižek, 2015).[2]

Indeed, this constitution takes on an added significance for the 'digital' subject. Hurley (1998) asserts that, for Žižek (2008), cyberspace presents a 'virtual realization' of the Self which has resulted in the determination of the subject being both 'found' and 'constructed' in the context of online digital platforms. Here we find 'the sociosymbolic aspect of self-representation' being replicated through a variety of handheld and wearable devices that increasingly '[tie] ourselves to the symbolic big Other of computer culture' (Nusselder, 2009, p.110). For many, this 'tying' of the self, avers the prospect of achieving 'a "better" or more agreeable self-image' (Nusselder, 2009, p.110). In doing so, we become practitioners in what Couldry refers to as 'the myth of the mediated centre' (2014, p.881). While traditional 'Media institutions work hard to sustain that myth, telling us we are all watching, that this programme or event shows "what's going on" for us as a society', equally, the ubiquity of our digital media environment provides a 'space of appearances' from which the 'symbolic power' of the media is maintained (Couldry, 2014, p.884).

This notion of 'myth' belies a more significant attribute which both characterizes and frames the 'space of appearances' that configure and shape our digital relations. That is, our relations with digital media are marked by a certain anonymity, an *inexistence*, which formally locates it with the 'virtuality' of the big Other. For example, when speaking to an online acquaintance, can we ever really be sure that the person we are speaking to is the person that we believe them to be (even when we may know this person in 'reality')? Equally, while we may be able to freely navigate our way through a host of internet sites or individual profiles, our interaction is always marked by a certain incomprehension of the scale of the digital space. This is echoed by Dean:

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[2] Tomšič helps to clarify the term ex-sistence as an 'ontological category aiming at the grey zone between existence and inexistence' (2018, pg.113).

> In a setting of multiply interlinked media, … we are never quite certain to what we have made ourselves visible. We don't know who is looking at us or how they are looking. We can't even be sure whether there is a single or multiple perspectives. Who is lurking on my blog? What databases am I in? Who has googled me and why? The lure of the Internet is not simply the paranoid's desire for a big Other behind the scenes. Rather, it resides in the gaps, holes, and uncertainties around which we circulate. (2010, p.12).

Accordingly, much like the big Other, our involvement with online platforms remains marked by an 'anonymous symbolic order whose structure is that of a labyrinth' (Žižek, 2017, p.130). Whether online or offline, our 'relationship to the Other is never *face-to-face*', but instead, 'it is always mediat(iz)ed by the interposed digital machinery which stands for the Lacanian "big Other"' (Žižek, 2017, p.130).

Though such a digital interposition helps to draw attention to Couldry's (2003) 'space of appearances', we can begin to consider how our relation to 'reality' is always-already structured via a series of 'appearances' that both maintain and uphold its consistency. These 'appearances' – or symbolic fictions – are what constitute the unwritten rules of society, prescribing a certain negotiation between the subject and the socio-cultural background that frames and supports their social interaction. What remains important is that the negotiation of these unwritten rules do not dispel the significance of the big Other, but rather, highlight how its *inexistence* 'is strictly correlative to the notion of belief, of symbolic trust, credence, of taking what others' say "at their word's value"' (Žižek, 2004, p.184). In other words, it is only through the subject's adherence to a symbolic order, grounded in 'trust', that the guise of the big Other is maintained. It is in this way that our relation to and with digital media can help to elaborate upon the significance of what Fredric Jameson refers to as a decline in 'symbolic efficiency' (Jameson, 1991).

'Trusting' the digital

The decline in our 'symbolic efficiency' is one given credence by a postmodern aesthetic that seeks to challenge and subvert normative assertions through an aversion to 'grand narratives' and forms of ideological authority (Flisfeder, 2019). In part, such aversions openly acknowledge the cultural aesthetic of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991),

with each aversion heralding the inexistence of the big Other. This neatly characterizes a media ecology which, while driven by a digital ascendancy in news and political communication, has ultimately become characterized by examples of 'post-truth', 'alternative facts' and 'fake news'. Certainly, the contemporary digital media user is well attuned to the practice of manipulation, which are achieved through a variety of filters and editing features that reconstruct our self-image. Under such circumstances, the 'reinvention' of the Self brings with it 'new opportunities for guilt and anxiety, new forms of submission, dependence, and domination' (Dean, 2007, p.30).

To this end, we can turn to Flisfeder's contention that the decline in symbolic efficiency does not suppose a 'loss of the symbolic order as such (the non-existence of the big Other), but rather … the loss of the symbolic efficiency of interpretation' (2014, p.238). Elaborating upon the significance of this decline in our interpretive efficiencies, Flisfeder notes how:

> Given that, … postmodernism commands obligatory enjoyment, the postmodern subject begins to experience the loss of authority as a *limitation* on enjoyment, and therefore, ideology, today, works, by practices of willing back into existence forms of authority (after they have been deconstructed by the various postmodern and post-structuralist critiques of grand narrative and big government/authority, and even the modern authoritative voice of the West and the masculine), or what Lacan called the 'big Other.' Even our activity on social media, the construction of self through the public profile, is a form of willing into existence the form of the big Other as those social networks that confer existence upon our constructed identity (2017, p.140).

For the majority of individuals, not believing everything you see online is today a commonly held assumption. However, from photoshopping and the use of 'filters', to the emergence of 'deepfake' videos in examples of revenge porn, fake news and celebrity hoaxes, what remains apparent is that our knowledge of these falsities does not limit, inhibit or prevent our use of digital media.[3] Indeed, while 'the postmodern subject is capable of pronouncing the nonexistence of the big Other' (Flisfeder, 2014,

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[3] 'Deepfake' refers to an image or video which synthetically transposes an image of someone onto another. In the case of pornography, the faces of famous celebrities are subsequently transposed onto an indidivual in a pornographic film, giving the impression that they are participating in the film.

p.239, f/n.9), ultimately, 'we remain in the dark regarding the Other's own self-knowledge of its non-existence' (Flisfeder, 2018, p.473). It is, therefore, through an act of *displacement* that our acknowledgement of the big Other's inexistence is effectively preserved via social/digital media (Flisfeder, 2014, 2018).

This posits a unique approach to the study of digital media and, specifically, the significance of DGM. That is, while remaining critical of any grand narrative which seeks to define, determine and delineate a presupposed path of utopian salvation – narratives that were previously held by the big Other – we, nonetheless, continue to seek the security of some form of big Other that can confer meaning and consistency in an era of uncertainty and disillusionment. In effect, though we remain openly aware and critically knowledgeable of the big Other's non-existence, we remain tied – both intentionally and unintentionally – to digital platforms that confer recognition: 'I tweet, therefore I exist; and the compulsion to (re)tweet is the symptom of our needing to feel affective recognition from the Other' (Flisfeder, 2014, p.238). In order to elaborate upon this significance, we need to give further consideration to the role of the subject in digital media.

'The illusory nature of the medium': Obfuscating the subject's lack and maintaining appearances

As argued in the previous section, it is evident that our relationship with digital media is one marked by the realization, or rather the acceptance, that not everything we see online can be taken at 'face value'. In accordance with a decline in our interpretative efficiencies, we can begin to trace how our relations to/with digital media are characterized by a 'fetishistic disavowal' (Pfaller, 2014; Žižek, 2008). That is, while 'we know very well that the media and our current cultural climate are influencing our behaviour and our choices as consumers to an extremely problematic extent, we still like to pretend that we are free to make our own choices' (Mangold, 2014, p.4). Such a *pretense* remains grounded in a level of interactivity that, while affording the opportunity to engage with a 'world wide web', nonetheless, remains enveloped in a passive engagement with the content onscreen. Yet, this passive engagement, is one that is paradoxically grounded in our own active involvement in digital environments.

Accordingly, the work of both Pfaller (2014) and Žižek (1998) has prescribed the notion of 'interpassivity' to help highlight how, under the superego command to

'Enjoy!', we increasingly turn to those forms of interaction that relieve us of the burden to enjoy. Nusselder explains:

> Media 'think,' 'comment,' and 'watch' for us. … News facts are checked by referring to other media ('what did the New York Times say about this?'). The work of commenting on television content is increasingly taken off the viewers' hands and executed by television shows themselves. … *Media generate a self-referential world that functions as a screen against ignorance, lack of information, lack of knowledge, or lack of skills. The media interfaces belief for us. With them we create a desirable world of (self-)representation.* As very commonsensical – or unimaginative – subjects, we may regard these representations as not real, but at the same time we ('unconsciously') live in their unlocked worlds. (2009, p.127, italics added).

Notably, while Nusselder's comments draw attention to the subject's realization that media representations – as evident in obvious forms of 'fake news' – may not be real, we can begin to see how our relation to/with digital/social media is one predicated upon a certain interpassivity. Indeed, 'Interpassivity means that an other undergoes the passive enjoyment for you. Mourners mourn for you, and in less dramatic situations the video recorder enjoys the film for you, or the sitcom's canned laughter laughs in your place' (Nusselder, 2009, p.126). Here, the requirement to have a 'personal opinion' is interpassively transferred to an online digital environment, from which a digital 'avatar' or 'handle' serves to re-present and 'share' our 'likes' and 'dislikes' (Poulard, 2013).[4] In the case of social media, 'Sharing becomes a euphemism … for producing, disclosing, and revealing information as content online' (Johanssen, 2019, p.22). Though often presented as a new form of global interaction, such 'sharing' reflects an entwinement of production and consumption – a 'prosumption' – from which subjects are required to both consume but also produce media content (Toffler, 1980).

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[4] This refers explicitly to Van Oenen's assertion 'that in more recent decades, the era of late or "post" modernity, it is … *activity* that we delegate. Overburdened by the demands of our ever more intensely interactive lifestyle, we yield to this pressure by delegating not passivity but activity, in order to be released, at least partially and for a while, from our interactive burden' (2008, pg.2, italics added). The contention between Pfaller's (2017) approach and Van Oenen's (2008) rests upon Pfaller's concern that it is 'passive consumption' of a particular artistic/cultural product which is interpassively transferred to an object or the product itself.

This inherent ambiguity highlights how our relationship with the digital screen; our involvement in online communities; and, our ability to interact and use social media platforms, can only ever be achieved through the adoption of a particular 'screen persona' (such as, a profile page; handle; avatar; or, username) (Žižek, 2017). While we are 'free to choose' an online persona, it is always an identity that forever 'betrays' the real 'you' (Žižek, 2017). The significance of these remarks bears witness to early discussions of our 'cyber-selves', which professed a 'break' from our socio-biological identities and everyday lives (Haraway, 1991). In actuality, our adoption of online identities serves only to reinforce a divided Self. Indeed, we are never the online personas we adopt, no matter how close to the 'real' *me* that this identity may seem. They are, in effect, a 'decaffeinated self': a depiction of us, without the 'real' (biological) thing (Žižek, 2006).[5]

At first this may seem a rather obvious assessment to make; yet, what it redirects attention to is the fundamental mediation of the Cartesian 'I' and the centrality of fantasy in constructing the Self (Nusselder, 2009). Such 'actualization' of the self is increasingly found 'in new formations, or in (on) new technological interfaces' (Nusselder, 2009, p.8). Accordingly, what remains key is how this fantasmastic projection of the online Self ignores the fact that 'We, as media users, as well as social media companies and other digital media services, *never really know who we are*' (Johanssen, 2019, p.180, italics added). It is in this sense that fantasy – both online and offline – provides a fundamental role in obfuscating the 'lack' at the heart of the Lacanian subject (Lacan, 2002). Here, Johanssen elaborates:

> It is this lack which is exploited when we are told that contemporary media will enable us to know ourselves better and in fact will be able to know us better than we could ever know ourselves. This results in a state of affective fragility we find ourselves in. Always subject to modification based on our own doings as well as that of others. It points to forms of media use which have fundamentally shifted our ways of cathecting media and media texts. (2019, p.180).

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[5] Equally, the same can also be said of our interaction with other online uses.

The efficacy of these claims needs to be considered in relation to the fact that our interpretive inefficiencies are marked by the concern that, today, the role of the 'big Other' is increasingly found in a variety of 'big Others', which each seek to bring a certain degree of certainty and understanding. As noted by Flisfeder (2014, 2017), this unease in our interpretative inefficiencies – interpretations that remain based upon a digital network, which, if anything, offers too much interpretation – is directed towards digital/social media platforms that afford 'an additional impetus to [… an] ideology of aesthetic self-creation' (Žižek, 2017, p.129). Such forms of 'aesthetic self-creation' are reflected in a host of online health and fitness regimes, which seek to encourage the digital media user to engage with online fitness programmes or even to follow a notable 'fitness celebrity' via their online images or workout routines. For the 'follower', engaging with these health and fitness regimes can often require them to upload statistical information, detailing their training improvements, or posting the now ubiquitous 'before and after' photo, which openly displays one's aesthetic improvements. However, in much the same way that Foucault (1990) sought to reveal how 'the subject has gained the freedom (or at least the promise, the prospect of freedom) to shift between different sociosymbolic sexual identities, to construct his/her Self as an aesthetic *oeuvre*' (Žižek, 2017, p.129); today, such 'construction' bears witness to the fact that our self-creation steers more towards maintaining and upholding an *appearance* of self-construction.

This appearance is effectively demonstrated in Hobbs contention that 'One must have a persona on the persona-based internet, but the persona must be honest, or at least *maintain the appearance of honesty*' (2019, italics added). Notably, it is the distrust in the online image which requires a displaced acknowledgment of its appearance. Again, such 'double-coding' is noted by Hobbs:

> For all our talk of Instagram as a vehicle for curating an idealized self, we know grainy displays of self-awareness are the real ticket – filterless, sparse bathroom mirror selfies are infinitely cooler than the obviously posed and airbrushed. They denote a certain status, … that comes with being in on the collective joke, with understanding the illusory nature of the medium and making use of it in a wry punchline at your own expense. You don't have to look talented or elegant online – as long as you are, or could be. (2019).

Certainly, the history of representation has always been one based upon selection, composition and editing; yet, what our social media prescribes is an open disavowal of these mechanisms, which both structure and frame our online interactions. In fact, it is this open construction of the Self that seems the only way to ensure a 'presence' within a heavily saturated media industry (Hobbs, 2019).

Central to these claims is the contention that while the ability to maintain 'appearances' serves as a constituent factor in one's relation to society – a maintenance that is conferred via the big Other – at the same time, '[one's] sens[e] of belonging and integration into a dominant culture requires that they successfully *negotiate* certain "distances" towards the big Other' (Kingsbury, 2017, p.2, italics added). Here, it is the interpretive inefficiency of this 'successful' negotiation which underscores our ambivalent relation to a big Other that is increasingly found through social media platforms and in the words and apparent wisdom of a variety of digital media gurus. It is on this basis that Flisfeder asserts that the subject's 'disavowal' of the big Other serves only to further tie the subject to social media platforms, so that 'In social media, the subject, who no longer believes in the existence of the big Other, works toward a willing of the big Other back into existence' (2014, pp.235-236).[6]

While 'Social media is one example of the secular solution to the lack of a big Other' (Flisfeder, 2014, p.236), this 'lack' is fetishistically disavowed in the (un)acknowledged appearances that structure and frame our digital relations. In fact, 'the "reification" of relations between people (the fact that they assume the form of phantasmagorical "relations between things")' – and here we can think of the reification of 'online' digital relations with 'friends' (we may never meet) – 'is always redoubled by the apparently opposite process – by the false "personalization" ("psychologization") of what are in fact objective social processes' (Žižek, 2000, p.349).[7] Though Žižek sought to locate this 'false' personalization in relation to a 'book market … overflowing with psychological manuals advising us on how to succeed, how to outdo our partner or competitor – in short, making our success dependent on our proper attitude' (2000, p.349), we can extend this analysis to the level of 'belief' which is afforded to the digital media guru.

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[6] Flisfeder (2018) elaborates upon this contention in relation to the work of Dean (2002) and in accordance with Lacan's understanding of desire and drive.

[7] See Black (2017) for an analysis of how the process of reification serves to support the personalization of notable, dead, celebrities.

The interpassivity of belief and the digital media guru

In part, the above discussion has sought to ascertain the significance of those 'symbolic fictions' which structure and orientate our daily 'digital' lives. For Žižek:

> What a cynic who 'believes only his eyes' misses is the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, the way this fiction structures our experience of reality. The same gap is at work our most intimate relationship to our neighbors: We behave AS IF we do not know that they also smell bad, secrete excrements, etc. – a minimum of idealization, of fetishizing disavowal, is the basis of our coexistence. (2004, pp.814-815 [sic], emphasis in original).

It is this 'minimum of idealization' which characterizes the acceptance of the Self and others' 'appearance' in social media platforms (Flisfeder, 2014, 2017, 2018). Indeed, while, on the one hand, we know that the person we follow, speak to, or share is largely constructed (photoshopping etc.), and, to a certain extent, may not even be 'real' (i.e. 'catfishing'), we, nonetheless, continue to behave *as if* this person is, or could be, a real living human being. Equally, though many of us may follow a well-known celebrity or will seek the advice and guidance of an online media personality, in most cases, we know we will never meet this 'real' person, but, instead, only ever engage with their mediated appearance (Black, 2017). In these instances, it is the 'as if' which helps to maintain a minimal consistency in our digital interactions.

Today, it can be argued that such minimal consistency is achieved, in part, through our relationship with digital/social media platforms, which render some form of the Self visible. As Nusselder asserts:

> By giving us the opportunity of being known, technologies make us believe that we are not nobodies, and thus they screen off the anxiety of having a weak sense of self. In general, the screens of technoculture protect us from uncertainty and anxiety by producing an attractive, convincing, (ideally) 'fully realized' world of representation. They create worlds of make-believe in which we actually live (with virtual money, virtual reality, virtual life, etc.). They believe for us, or we must believe in them, since we cannot get out of them: what do I know of the

world without my television and computer? There is an affiliation of interactive and interpassive mediation and techno-logical mediatization. The apparatuses give both belief and alienation. (2009, p.128).

What is key in Nusselder's assessment is the sense of anxiety which pervades this world of appearances. The degree to which our digital platforms interpassively encourage both 'belief and alienation' is clearly reflected in the comments of Sarah Nicole Prickett (a journalist/editor and 'social media influencer'), who noted:

> I very much have a public persona, even though it's a small public, but I feel detached from it. It's exactly that. It's something I have, not something I am. It's not even something I feel like I made with any intent, which is also not something I'm proud about. If I were to Google myself, I would be horrified. So I don't. Wait, is that true? I did once six months ago, but I spiralled so fast I'll probably never do it again. The problem is that I'm incredibly vain but I also forget that I'm vain, so I'll do something on the Internet not thinking how it'll look later, or that it'll last at all, and the only solution is not to look back. I'm always envious of people who decided how to look before getting anyone to look at them. That's a kind of persona I would love, but I would also have to be a different person. (Prickett cited in Hurr, 2015 [sic]).

Prickett's assertions are evidently paradoxical, and, as a result, they neatly capture the unique position that digital media evokes for the subject: the sense of ambiguity that one has when 'Googleing' their name, or when they are met with a particular online description or depiction which seeks to tell the subject who they are (Žižek, 2008; Žižek and Daly, 2004).

With this in mind, we can begin to trace the significance of the digital media guru in accordance with work that has considered the impact of social media influencers. For the latter, Abidin (2016) highlights how the influencer is usually described as someone who garners a large online following with a specific fan group. As noted, many of these fans will never meet this online persona, but they will, nonetheless, 'see' them and follow them through online social media platforms, such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Certainly, these influencers and 'gurus' are not doing it simply to be heard or seen, but rather, work to achieve their own form

of 'visibility labour' (Abidin, 2016) – a 'visibility' which remains tied to potential advertisers. As a result, forms of self-branding and 'micro celebrity' underscore a neoliberal framework of self-creation, whereby the influencer's 'personal brand' becomes a point of outreach for commercial companies (Khamis et al., 2017). This is best reflected by those 'health and fitness' gurus whose 'success' can lead to a variety of lucrative tie-ins with international health and fitness brands.

In the context of health and wellbeing, examples of 'fitness media' can be traced through the publication of fitness magazines, as well as videos/DVDs, each seeking to 'sell' and promote a 'healthy' lifestyle. This media was published alongside a variety of consumer goods and products, such as gym equipment and attire, cooking apparatuses and artisan food (Smith Maguire, 2008). Of particular note, are the early exercise videos by Jane Fonda, which, as Smith Maguire (2008) highlights, helped to bolster her career as well as engender a subsequent 'fitness craze'. While these products proved integral to producing the 'fitness consumer', they also served as 'therapeutic guides', from which one could learn, purchase and become the ideal lifestyle consumer (Smith Maguire, 2008).

Today, the sale of health and fitness DVDs remains popular, but the advent of social (digital) media has allowed 'health and fitness' gurus to target audiences via a range of social media platforms that provide continual updates on how to eat, exercise and cook your way to a healthier lifestyle. Indeed, for many of these health and wellness 'gurus', online videos and social media 'posts' offer an opportunity to monetize their content via payed advertisements and commercial tie-ins. However, what remains 'unique' about the online, social media guru is the relative ease in producing and sharing content. While previous 'gurus', such as Fonda, had the expertise of a production company, today, anyone can potentially film, edit and market *themselves* (their Self) via online/digital platforms. In effect, anyone could, through a successfully branded strategy, achieve 'online' celebrity and garner a large following.

To this end, digital media, and social media in particular, effectively supports Dean's (2002) contention that our understanding of the Self is increasingly predicated on the visibility and knowingness which social media platforms can afford. What is significant, is that Dean's (2002) argument emphasizes the importance of 'appearance', in that while we seek to be known online – and may even wish to increase our visibility – we effectively *imitate* the 'online' (or even offline) celebrity via a digital platform

that maintains a visible and perpetual 'appearance'. Drawing specifically from Dean's (2002) work, Nusselder highlights:

> This is not a naive fantasy of consciously imagining oneself a celebrity while knowing that in reality one is not. We know that we are not celebrities, *but still act as if we believe that we are: the technologies believe for us*. (2009, p.127, italics added).

To this extent, we can begin to see how our relation to, what this collection is referring to as, the digital media guru, is one fostered on a certain notion of belief, which is achieved through the Other (Žižek, 2001).

Indeed, when considered in relation to the subject's desire to identify with some form of big Other (Flisfeder, 2014, 2017), it becomes apparent that the significance of the digital media guru is one that resides in its position as that which can believe for us. That is, while we remain fully aware of the appearances and ambivalences that structure our online engagements, we interpassively convey *our* belief in a big Other through *displaced* forms, such as, the digital media guru. This is how, 'In an uncanny way, some beliefs always seem to function "at a distance": in order for the belief to function, there *has to be* some ultimate guarantor of it, yet this guarantor is always deferred, displaced, never present *in persona*' (Žižek, 2008, p.139).[8] It is this 'distance' that is interpassively managed through the subject's *displaced* acknowledgement of the various 'appearances' which interpassively structure and frame digital media. This is not to ignore the significance that the digital media guru can evoke for their followers. Here, the expression of a set of ideas, values and beliefs that bring some form of influence and consistency to the online follower, serves to constitute the voice of the big Other; thus, allowing their followers to change, adapt and give meaning to their lives (Bracher, 1993).

Though our need to 'believe' is one closely tied to fantasy formations, which provide some minimal consistency to our lives; and, while we remain aware that the 'authenticity' of the digital media guru is constructed, manufactured and performed, the

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[8] Žižek continues, 'the subject who directly believes, needs not exist for the belief to be operative: it is enough precisely to *presuppose* its existence, i.e. to *believe* in it, either in the guise of the mythological founding figure who is not part of our experiential reality, or in the guise of the impersonal "one" ("one believes")' (1998, p.139).

follower is, nonetheless, afforded 'a *promise* of "authenticity"' (Khamis et al., 2017, p.202, italics added). Yet, it should not be forgotten that, much like the subject, such 'promise' is grounded in the big Other's 'inexistence' – i.e. in its own inherent 'lack'. Certainly, such lack is not meant to evoke a negative account of either the subject or society (Symbolic order/big Other) – from which existence is meaningless and devoid of any significance – rather, it is to draw attention to those 'excessive' forms that seek to obfuscate the impossibility of ever fulfilling or completing the impasses of the symbolic order. It is at this level of 'excess' that the 'appearance' of the digital media guru resides.

Therefore, it is in accordance with this 'excess' that we can approach the Lacanian axiom: 'there is no big Other'; an assertion which effectively 'implies that the big Other cannot even persist as a coherent symbolic fiction since it is thwarted by immanent antagonisms and inconsistencies' (Žižek, 2020, p.167). Accordingly, if we determine that 'what is threatened in the digitalization of our daily lives is not our free subjectivity but the big Other itself, the agency of the symbolic order, in its "normal" functioning' (Žižek, 2020, p.166-167) – i.e. in its own inherent, yet negotiated, inconsistency – then, Žižek's reference to 'agency' draws attention to the fact that it is in accordance with the big Other's naïve observations that such 'agency' is maintained via its own inexistence (Pfaller, 2014). That is, it is in negotiation with this naïve observer that the symbolic fictions and everyday appearances which structure 'daily life' are maintained (Kingsbury, 2017). In short, the virtual, digital big Other (or, digital media guru) serves to materialize the virtual, non-existent, symbolic big Other.

However, where Žižek (2020) highlights that it is the '"normal" functioning' of the big Other which remains threatened by our digitalization, equally, it is under the authority of the digital media guru that the 'agency' of the big Other is split *between* its 'normal' day-to-day functioning (as the arbiter of unwritten rules that uphold and maintain our 'real' interactions) *and* a digital media guru, whose mere 'appearance' serves to obfuscate such inconsistency through a consistent set of virtual appearances. In fact, for the digital media guru, it is their words, advice, knowledge and imagery, which excessively appropriates the 'normal' functioning of the symbolic order; grounded in a level of ubiquity which is established through an endless cycle of virtual ('posted') appearances. Only by excessively uploading content, engaging with followers and re-purposing their online material, ensuring its relevant uniqueness, can the 'online' appearance of the 'health and wellbeing/fitness guru' be maintained.

Ultimately, what we lose, or, what remains 'threatened' in this division of the big Other, is the 'appearance' as such: we get nothing but appearances, alongside the displaced acknowledgement that they simply are appearances.

Alienation-Separation in Digital Guru Media

It would seem that our digital media environments offer both promise and peril (Hurley, 1998). Over the course of this chapter, this confliction has been considered in light of Lacan's notion of the big Other, from which our use of social media, and our following of digital media gurus, offers the potential for reinstalling some form of big Other (Flisfeder, 2014). Yet, such desire reveals a more fundamental problem: while we are well aware of the possible ineffectiveness of 'big plans', 'grand ideas' and simple resolutions, our use of digital media – a quick click on an online search engine, for example – evidently highlights that any idea or assertion we have can quickly be debunked, critiqued or reevaluated. It is in this regard that our use of digital media and our relation to the digital media guru is one grounded in a displaced acknowledgement of their 'appearance'.

However, this approach seeks to neither deride nor undermine the significance of this displacement. Whether online or offline, individuals have usually sought some form of reassurance in guides or gurus, who offer the opportunity for understanding and belief. Nevertheless, if we are to follow the Lacanian axiom: 'there is no big Other'; then, our understanding of this assertion requires a *realization* that 'What "speaks through me" is just an inconsistent and contradictory pandemonium, not some agency that controls the game and delivers messages' (Žižek, 2020, p.167). Therefore, locating the digital media guru under the rubric of a 'digital big Other' (Žižek, 2020) can allow us to draw attention to this inherent inconsistency. Here, Žižek asserts:

> the digital big Other, overflown by data, is immanently stupid, it doesn't (and cannot) 'get' what all these data amount to, so it can never function as a true paranoiac Other who knows us better than we know ourselves. The digital big Other is by definition (not a man but) a machine which 'knows too much,' it is unable (not to take into account all the complexity of the situation but) to simplify it, to reduce it to its essentials. (2020, p.169).

In effect, to accede to the big Other, is, as Žižek notes, a path of 'refuge' that ensures that the subject never has to acknowledge 'the traumatic confrontation with the big Other's ultimate impotence and imposture' (1993, p.253).

Taken in the context of digital media, this refuge has become all the more pervasive (Dean, 2002).[9] It is in this regard that our understanding of the digital media guru can offer an opportunity to fully engage with the inevitability of our alienation; an acceptance which prescribes a confrontation with the Real (Žižek, 2017). Indeed, this confrontation bears witness to a 'key distinction' (Žižek, 2020). Žižek notes:

> [The] subject is not only alienated in the big Other, this big Other is already alienated from itself, thwarted from within, separated from its real core, and it is this separation in the heart of the big Other itself which sustains the space for subjectivity. For Lacan, subject is not threatened by the big Other, it is not in danger of being overwhelmed and stifled by the big Other (in short, it is not a humanist agent trying to dominate "objective structures" that determine it), it is constituted, it emerges at the site of the inconsistency of the big Other. (2020, p.168)

This 'emerg[ence] at the site of … inconsistency' runs throughout our engagement with digital media (the digital big Other), so that while the promise of digital media offers the opportunity to escape our surroundings, such constant 'reinvention' and 'reshaping' of the Self, serves only to accentuate the nothingness (the lack) at the heart of the subject – its fundamental alienation. Accordingly, under:

> the postmodern postulate of the subject's indefinite plasticity … we can see how extreme individualization (the endeavour to be true to one's Self outside imposed fixed socio-symbolic roles) tends to overlap with its opposite, with the uncanny, anxiety-provoking feeling of the loss of one's identity – is this not the ultimate confirmation of Lacan's insight into how one can achieve a minimum of identity and 'be oneself' only by accepting the fundamental alienation in the symbolic network? (Žižek, 2000, p.373).

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[9] See Dean (2010) for further discussion on the relevance of desire and drive to understandings of 'new media' in the context of 'communicative capitalism'.

Certainly, the above critique does not seek to promote such anxiety, but, rather, to describe 'the need but also difficulty of presenting the self on social media' (Johannssen, 2019, p.132). It is on this basis that we are not simply determined by our digital structures, but instead, can confront the gap within the socio-symbolic order by acknowledging the inherent 'lack' in both the subject *and* the digital big Other.

Undoubtedly, there is always the potential that one gives themselves 'completely' to a particular digital media guru, but such personal devotion/subjection is not inevitable. We can instead, as Nussleder asserts:

> recognize the screen's capacities to lure and indulge us in a 'fully realized world' in so-called moments of closure. But when we avoid fixating this closure as being 'real reality' itself (which is the proper 'task' of the 'unsettled' subject), then the screen allows us to play, to indulge or enjoy our fantasies and create a certain distance from and insight into them. (2009, p.142).

It is this 'certain distance' which can allow us to 'digitally' approach the fantasies, desires and forms of 'appearance' that typically structure our socio-symbolic orders. In part, this reconciliation resides within the awareness that digital media can bring to the role of 'appearance' and how such 'appearances' provide a minimal consistency to the decline in our interpretive capacities. While this relative level of 'efficiency' (the *as if* of belief) works to mask the inherent lack that constitutes both the subject and the Other, it also pre-scribes the subject's separation from the Other/symbolic order, allowing the subject to manage their 'total alienation' by marking their lack as complimentary to that in the Other (Žižek, 2008a).

Through the mediation of belief, and the interpassivity that frames our relations with the digital media guru, this separation – or self-decentrement[10] - is amiable to the fact that:

> On the Internet this way of functioning is not different from 'real life.' We may at first think, or actually experience for a moment, that the medium offers us freedom, but we then find out that it constructs a specific world (instead of

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[10] For more on digital media and self-decentrement, see Black (2020).

reflecting the 'true world'). Subjectivation of fantasy rests on those two pillars of (unconscious) belief and (reflexive) insight. (Nusselder, 2009, p.140).

When considered in relation to the digital media guru, such 'Subjectivation of fantasy' redirects attention to the impasses and inconsistencies that constitute the subject and digital big Other. It is here that, in the context of the digital media guru, we can begin to confront 'the impasse [that] we find ourselves in due to the absence of authority' (Canellopoulos, 2010, p.147). While, for Canellopoulos, this 'requires that each one of us finds his[/her] own answer, which will then determine the answers of others', in the context of the digital media guru, such answers can help provide a social 'outcome [that] can only be collective and this is how the social bond is renewed' (2010, p.147). Ultimately, such renewal may prove indicative of the digital media guru.

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