

# The Analog City and the Digital City

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Since the advent of the Internet roughly a half century ago, digital media has been heralded as an agent of empowerment and democratic liberation. Along the Information Superhighway lay peace, progress, and prosperity. There were critics along the way, of course, but their warnings were for the most part dismissed or ignored. As late as 2011, journalists and technologists were praising social media's emancipatory power in light of the role of Facebook and Twitter in the Arab Spring revolts. But, as has been noted many times, after the U.S. presidential election in 2016, such optimism increasingly appeared naïve and misguided. Now Facebook and Twitter are seen as corrosive forces polluting the public sphere with misinformation, generating vitriol and outrage, and misusing user data for manipulative political ad targeting.

Americans from across the political spectrum have grown wary and weary of how digital technology is shaping political culture. Both Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Republican Senator Josh Hawley have been cheered for skewering Mark Zuckerberg, and calls to regulate Big Tech have taken on an increasingly bipartisan tenor. Global developments have contributed to this growing apprehension, as social media platforms have been implicated in the rise of authoritarian regimes, in the proliferation of massive disinformation operations, and even in genocidal campaigns against minority populations.

The heightened scrutiny of the political uses to which social media has been put is necessary and important. But it tends to miss a critical aspect of our situation. Much of the analysis tacitly assumes that our underlying political structures and values have remained relatively stable, that they will not fundamentally change—even if they must be defended against the usual illiberal suspects, who deploy digital media in their efforts to undermine the legitimacy of democracies. If only Zuck would take more aggressive measures to purge Facebook of fake news, and if only Jack would ban all the Nazis from Twitter, then all would be well and we could proceed

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with business as usual. Much like the proverbial generals who always fight the last war, however, we will be undone in our efforts to make sense of our moment and to respond productively if we don't recognize that digital media is reconfiguring our politics at a more fundamental level.

The challenges we are facing are not merely the bad actors, whether they be foreign agents, big tech companies, or political extremists. We are in the middle of a deep transformation of our political culture, as digital technology is reshaping the human experience at both an individual and a social level. The Internet is not simply a tool with which we do politics well or badly; it has created a new environment that yields a different set of assumptions, principles, and habits from those that ordered American politics in the pre-digital age.

We are caught between two ages, as it were, and we are experiencing all of the attendant confusion, frustration, and exhaustion that such a liminal state involves. To borrow a line from the Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

Although it's not hard to see how the Internet, given its scope, ubiquity, and closeness to human life, radically reshapes human consciousness and social structures, that does not mean that the nature of that reshaping is altogether preordained or that it will unfold predictably and neatly. We must then avoid crassly deterministic just-so stories, and this essay is not an account of how digital media will necessarily change American politics irrespective of competing ideologies, economic forces, or already existing political and cultural realities. Rather, it is an account of how the ground on which these realities play out is shifting. Communication technologies are the material infrastructure on which so much of the work of human society is built. One cannot radically transform that infrastructure without radically altering the character of the culture built upon it. As Neil Postman once put it, "In the year 1500, fifty years after the printing press was invented, we did not have old Europe plus the printing press. We had a different Europe." So, likewise, we may say that in the year 2020, fifty years after the Internet was invented, we do not have old America plus the Internet. We have a different America.

## **The Two Cities**

A loose analogy might give us a better sense of our situation, or at least supply a useful bit of shorthand. We might say that our public sphere

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is now inhabited by the citizens of two “cities,” the Digital City and the Analog City. Much of the stress under which our body politic now labors, much of the strangeness of our moment, much of our apparent inability to move productively forward as a society, may be attributed in part to the emergence of the Digital City and its dramatic growth over the past two decades. To understand the political meaning of digital media, then, we should seek to understand the nature of the Digital City and how it is ordering the affections of its citizens and transforming public life.

The analogy, of course, draws on Saint Augustine, who in *The City of God* proposed the existence of two distinct cities, whose relationship structures the whole of human history. In Augustine’s account, the City of God comprises the faithful throughout history, and the City of Man, or the earthly city, comprises the faithless. In Augustine’s own time, the growing Church in the midst of the pagan empire was the most visible manifestation of the City of God. Critically, for the purpose of our analogy, the citizens of these two cities shared one common public sphere. They would pass each other on the same roads, trade in the same markets, and even fight alongside each other in the same army. But while they inhabited the same political space and played their parts in the same political institutions, they were formed by two different sets of affections and loyalties. The public sphere contained individuals with ultimately divergent fundamental beliefs about reality, the moral life, and civil society. Over time, as the citizens of the City of God grew in number, the character of the shared public realm was transformed.

We can borrow the basic structure of Augustine’s vision as a way of thinking about digital media and American political culture. Let us play, then, with the idea of a Digital City and an Analog City, and consider how the tension between the two shapes our moment. Our political culture has been hitherto formed predominantly by the Analog City, which reflected to varying degrees both the inheritance of print culture and the conditions created by electronic media. What we are now witnessing is the ascendancy of the Digital City, which is characterized primarily by the advent of ubiquitous Internet connectivity, no longer just at home or work but also on mobile technology. Of course, the analogy to Augustine’s two cities breaks down at a point—the Digital City is in most respects unlike the City of God, nor are we considering eternal destinies. The key parallel is that our participation in the public sphere is shaped largely by our loyalties to one or the other city and that we are witnessing the emerging dominance of one of them. Some of us have inhabited both the Analog City and the Digital City, while an increasing number of us have known only the Digital City.

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It is useful to remember where exactly we are in the history of the Digital City. The Internet has been around for a half century, but the World Wide Web—the part of the Internet we access through web browsers—is about thirty years old. The transition to what was dubbed Web 2.0, which made participation more widely accessible, and connected what we then quaintly thought of as our “in real life” identity more closely to our online presence, began just over fifteen years ago. The transition to smartphones and tablets, which made digital media a constant presence in our lives and our default media environment, has occurred only over the last decade. In other words, only recently has the Digital City begun to manifest itself in the public spaces that have been hitherto ordered by the priorities and sensibilities of the Analog City. Before then, the consequences of digital media, although much discussed, remained superficial, which allowed us to believe that the future would be business as usual, only faster and better and more inclusive.

If two distinct communities now reside within the same political space, the conflicts that characterize this space will increasingly reflect the tensions between these two communities. When some phenomenon perplexes our pundit class, when our time-worn political concepts seem incapable of making sense of it, we may be witnessing just such a clash between the Digital and Analog cities.

Take fact-checking, for example. As it became increasingly clear that all manner of deliberate lies, misinformation, and conspiracy theories were circulating widely through social media channels in connection with the 2016 election, many observers stressed the need for more aggressive fact-checking. The part of me that reflected the years I was formed within the Analog City nodded approvingly. The part of me that was beginning to recognize the significance of the Digital City shook its head in disbelief that anyone thought this an adequate solution. The part of me that was already being reshaped by the Digital City just thought to himself: ㄝ(ツ)ㄟ.

The anodyne insistence on fact-checking to bridge chasms in worldview misunderstands the nature of our new media environment; it fails to see the difference between the economics of information scarcity and the economics of information abundance. Information scarcity may lend itself to a measure of credulity: When facts are few, persuading the ignorant is relatively easy. But information abundance, already characteristic of early modern societies, engenders a degree of skepticism: The more there is to know, the more likely we feel that truth is elusive. Information super-abundance, or the condition of “digital plenitude,” as media scholar Jay David Bolter has called it, encourages the view that truth isn’t real:

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Whatever view you want to validate, you'll find facts to support it. All information is also now potentially disinformation. Fact-checking, however well-intentioned, does not solve the problem; paradoxically, it may in some cases make it worse. It is an Analog City solution insufficient to the problems of the Digital City.

### **The Word Reanimated**

How do we best understand the formative power of the Digital City? Why would the emergence of digital communication technologies radically alter our political culture?

We can begin by framing the advent of the Internet within a longer story about communication technologies. The broad outlines of this story are by now familiar. The invention of writing, especially the invention of the phonetic alphabet, “restructured consciousness,” in Walter Ong’s memorable phrase, and so restructured societies as well. It did so, in part, by making new forms of expression, organization, and remembering possible. Writing, for instance, made it possible to detach the act of communication from the context of the face-to-face encounter, thereby tempering what Ong called the “agonistic” tendencies of such encounters—their resemblance to combat—particularly in the political realm. Writing also “separates ‘administration’—civil, religious, commercial, and other—from other types of social activities.” And it externalized thought and memory, engendering the novel experience of the mediated self, marked by heightened self-awareness.

The consequences of writing disseminated gradually, as writing was, for much of its history, a practice limited to a few. Beginning in the sixteenth century, printing accelerated and distributed the effects of the written word, playing a critical role in the emergence of the modern world—famously in the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century with the telegraph, electronic media began to reshape the order built on the foundation of print, a reordering that grew more pronounced with the appearance of radio and television. For the first time in history, a dispersed mass audience could be reached simultaneously, helping to produce a culture in which slow reflection on the printed word gave way to instantaneous reaction on a mass scale. Then digital media appeared on the scene, intensifying this transformation while at the same time reviving the volatility and drama of two-way, instant communication.

I paint this picture with admittedly broad strokes. A closer, more granular look at any of these developments will, as any historian of

technology knows, reveal all manner of interesting twists and turns, unexpected developments and alternative paths that were abandoned or refused. However, the basic implication of the broad narrative remains. As Neil Postman puts it:

New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think *about*. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop.

The first alteration—in the things we think *about*—can be described in terms of attention, which has so vexed our public discourse about technology in the last few years. (Although as early as 2008, Nicholas Carr had already raised lonely alarms and even warned against the dangers of micro-targeted advertising.) The structure of a medium of communication guides and directs our attention. Television, for example, directs our attention to the physical characteristics of a political figure in a way that print and radio don't. The telegraph made it possible to bring far away events to broad public attention on a daily basis, thereby altering the topics and pace of political discourse. Digital media now makes it possible to attend to an even wider array of phenomena, near and far, and often in so-called "real time." And, insofar as our social media feeds are shaped by opaque algorithmic processes and engineered to maximize engagement, they play an especially obvious role in altering what we think about.

Postman's second alteration—in the things we think *with*—can be glossed as follows: It is one thing to think with a pamphlet, another to think with a newspaper, yet another to think with a televisual image, and still another to think with a meme. Writing encourages a heightened precision of expression and a sequential and systematic ordering of ideas and arguments. The television image does both more and less than what writing can accomplish, operating at a different emotional register. It can communicate wordlessly, directly to the heart, as it were, but it cannot easily support nor does it encourage sustained argumentation.

But let us think more about the last of these three alterations—about how new technologies alter the nature of community. The human self, as philosophers have long noted, emerges in relation to others, or to the Other, if you like. The character of the self develops under the gaze of this Other, and is shaped by it. In the Digital City, we are under the gaze of an algorithmically constituted, collective Other. This audience, composed of friends, strangers, and non-human actors, is unlike anything we might have encountered in the Analog City. Like the gaze of God, it is a

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ubiquitous face looking down upon us, whose smile we dearly desire. We seek its approval, or, failing that, at least its notice, and we subtly bend our self-presentation to fit our expectations of what this audience desires of us.

As is now well known, social media platforms have been deliberately calibrated—using likes, retweets, and other reward mechanisms—to hijack our desire for attention and approval. This hybrid, cyborg audience, because of its ability to colonize every dimension of our experience, blurring the older distinctions between private and public life, heightens the power of the Digital City to shape our identities. Other peer groups remain, of course: family, school, colleagues, neighborhoods, religious communities, and so forth. But the formative power of these groups wanes in comparison to that of the digitally mediated audience, which lends the Digital City its Skinner-box quality of instant reinforcement.

The Digital City also shapes its citizens through its cultivation of habit and disposition. Online venues, whether social media platforms, messaging apps, or forums, are not simply places we go to express our political opinions; they are places where our political habits and sensibilities are formed. This formation includes how we speak. A platform's distinctive moderation policies, reward systems, and other affordances structure our experience on the platform, how we express ourselves and encounter the expressions of others, how we modify our speech and demand that others modify theirs.

Free-speech maximalists, who believe that there should be no limits to what you can say regardless of how odious the opinions may be, are distressed by the alacrity with which some are prepared to call for the speech of others to be curtailed or circumscribed. But free-speech maximalism flourishes in print culture; in the Digital City it appears less desirable, for two reasons. First, print culture sustained the belief that, given a modicum of good sense and education among people, truth would triumph in the marketplace of ideas. Writing and reading are slow and deliberate, encouraging the belief that false ideas will eventually be rejected by anyone trained to think. Second, we experience the written word as an inert reality—it is the “dead letter,” it has lost the force and immediacy of the spoken word. Because writing is less volatile than speech, it makes freedom of expression seem relatively harmless.

But before we conceived of a word as a thing composed of markings on a surface, it was a living, effectual action. Words were not things; they *did* things. This, for example, is why people in print culture have a difficult time understanding why Isaac is unable simply to retract the blessing he has given to Jacob under false pretenses: The word is out and cannot

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be taken back. In the Digital City the word is reanimated, recovering from the written much of the vitality of the spoken word. Digital media reintegrates the word into a dynamic situation. The digital audience is not always visible, but it can be present with a degree of immediacy that is more like a face-to-face encounter than are print writing and reading. Discourse on digital media platforms, from comment boxes to social media, is infamously combative. Words are active, and any negative effects are not easily contained.

Moreover, digital plenitude no longer sustains the hope that the truth will win out in the marketplace of ideas. Information super-abundance renders implausible the traditional ideal of the citizen as well-informed, critical thinker. Instead, it fosters the desire for tools that give users the ability to selectively censor their feeds, and the instinct to rely on moderators to restrict speech so as to conform with their values.

### **Shattered Myths**

Our political dispositions and beliefs emerge as much from our embodied engagement with the material order of the world as they do from our consciously held ideas about the world. But the beliefs newly fostered by the Digital City have turned out to be at odds with those of the modern Analog City. The myths, benign and otherwise, that sustained the modern world now fail to inspire or motivate. They have lost their purchase on our imaginations and affections. Their urgently repeated invocation—more facts, more science, more experts; know your history; stand by your country—now rings hollow.

To better understand the consequences of digital media, then, we need to look more closely at how it shapes human experiences that have especially salient political dimensions—how, for example, it shapes the experience of the self, of place and time, and how it predisposes us to think about the socio-political order. Let us look at each of these in turn.

### ***The Reenchanted Self***

In his account of the nature of secular society, Charles Taylor argues that an important part of the emergence of the modern age was the disenchantment of the world and the rise of what he describes as the “buffered self.” Unlike the old “porous self,” the new buffered self no longer perceives and believes in sources of meaning outside the human mind. This new self feels unperturbed by powers beyond its control. We might say that in the Digital City the self becomes in some ways “porous” once

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again. It is subject to powers that we perceive as impinging on us, powers now algorithmic rather than spiritual.

Taylor's discussion of disenchantment begins with the question of meaning. In our disenchanted modern world, meaning arises only from minds, and the human mind is the only kind of mind there is. Nothing external to the human mind bears any meaning in itself. Moreover, there are no non-human agents, either made of matter or spirit. By contrast, in the enchanted world things and spirits have the "power of exogenously inducing or imposing meaning," a meaning that is independent of the perceiver and that we may be forced to reckon with whether we would like to or not. Objects in the enchanted world can also have a causal power. These "charged" objects, Taylor explains, "have what we usually call 'magic' powers," and they can be either benevolent or malevolent. They may bring blessing or trouble, cure or disease, rescue or danger. "Thus in the enchanted world," Taylor writes, "charged things can impose meanings, and bring about physical outcomes proportionate to their meanings." The vulnerable self sought refuge in a well-ordered society whose ritual life was designed to protect its members from malign forces. As Taylor explains, this is in part why heresy was so dangerous. The heretic was not only a source of intellectual error, he also compromised the security of the community by compromising its purity.

According to Taylor, the enchanted world "shows a perplexing absence of certain boundaries which seem to us essential." In particular, "the boundary between mind and world is porous." The "porous self" in an enchanted world is thus "vulnerable, to spirits, demons, cosmic forces. And along with this go certain fears which can grip it in certain circumstances." By contrast, the "buffered self," characteristic of the disenchanted world, is "invulnerable" and "master of the meanings of things for it." It is also immune to the fears that may grip the porous self. The buffered self is sealed off from the world; its boundaries are less fuzzy; meaning resides neatly within its own mind; and it occupies a world of inert matter. It is autonomous and self-possessed, the ideal type of the modern individual.

Certain features of the self in an enchanted world are now reemerging in the Digital City. Digital technologies influence us and exert causal power over our affairs. In the Digital City, we are newly aware of operating within a field of inscrutable forces over which we have little to no control. Though these forces may be benevolent, they are just as often malevolent, undermining our efforts and derailing our projects. We often experience digital technologies as determining our weal and woe, acting

upon us independently of our control and without our understanding. We are vulnerable, and our autonomy is compromised.

We are troubled not by spirits but by bots and opaque algorithmic processes, which alternately and capriciously curse or bless us. In the Digital City, individuals may be refused credit, passed over for job interviews, or denied welfare on the basis of systems built on digital data against which they have little to no recourse. The self that emerges out of this digitally mediated milieu more resembles the porous self of the old enchanted world than the buffered self of disenchanting modernity. Consequently, the self that emerges in the Digital City is more likely to seek refuge in a social body and to strive for the purity of that body.

The modern Analog City, particularly its print-based ecosystem of knowledge and the growing success of the techno-scientific project of mastery over nature, engendered the ideals of robust, confident, self-sufficient individualism. The Digital City disabuses its citizens of such notions. They know they are dependent and vulnerable, enmeshed in systems beyond their capacity to master.

### *The Perpetual Now*

As embodied creatures, our experience is structured by time and place. Time and place are also critical dimensions of our political identities. Where and when are the people with whom I must relate, or to whom I feel a measure of loyalty? Identifying the communities to which we belong has traditionally been a matter of knowing our place. A characteristic of the modern nation is that it defines citizenship not along familial or tribal lines but along geographic lines. Our orientation to time likewise shapes our social and political lives, as do the form and content of our memories. Communities have always drawn on shared stories and memories. Our experience of place and time is not always direct, however, but is often mediated by technology. When technological change reorders our relationship to place and time, it also reorders our social and political sensibilities.

Like the City of God, the Digital City exists in no particular place and abides by its own rules of time. Digital communities emerge in shared time rather than in shared space; simultaneity is the coin of the realm. The Digital City orders the lives of its citizens in keeping with a perpetual present disassociated from both past and future, heightening a tendency already present in electronic mass media like television. Mass media audiences shared time, while smaller groups also shared spaces, gathering in

front of the television, or by the radio, or in the theater. Mobile digital technology, however, has strained the link between presence and place, making it optional. We may now be in multiple places at once, here in my body, but there in speech or vision. The community to which I find myself most drawn may not exist in any one place, composed as it is of scattered kindred spirits brought together through digital technology.

The triumph of shared time and the demise of shared place in the Digital City changes the experience of social belonging. While the modern state is not going anywhere anytime soon, the relationship of citizens to the nation is evolving. Loyalty to the community that is the nation state, already detached to some degree from local communities, yields to the shifting loyalties of digital attachments.

It is not only our experience of the present that digital media refashions but also our relationship, through memory, to the past. “What anthropologists distinguish as ‘cultures,’” Ivan Illich wrote, “the historian of mental spaces might distinguish as different ‘memories.’ The way to recall, to remember, has a history which is, to some degree, distinct from the history of the substance that is remembered.” We are, at least in part, what we remember, both as individuals and as a society, and *what* we remember is a function of *how* we remember, of our tools for remembering—texts, images, monuments, social media feeds. A change in tools is also a change of the self and its relation to society. There are few more important effects of digital technologies than their propensity to reorder how and what we remember.

Again, the consequences are most evident when seen in light of history. Oral societies, Walter Ong argued, were deeply conservative because knowledge was scarce and fragile. All memory was living memory, and knowledge would die with those who held it if they did not pass it on to another person. Language itself, especially in what we would think of as its more poetic manifestations, was focused on mnemonic efficiency: proverbs, parables, vivid images, rhythmic utterances, rituals, formulaic expressions, repetitions—much of what became unpalatable to the literate sensibility.

Writing allowed for the durable storage of knowledge independently of human beings. Not only can written knowledge outlive a particular individual, it can outlive a whole culture. By outsourcing the task of remembrance to written texts, literate societies are relieved of the conservative and traditionalist pressures of orality. Thus, whereas premodern societies tended to look back to a distant and glorious past, many modern societies, with their imaginations liberated, were utopian in their

expectations, assuming the best was still to come. However, for many centuries literacy remained unevenly distributed across the population, and communal, oral habits of mind and expression remained common through much of the modern era.

When writing was introduced into oral cultures it was typically deployed in the service of institutions and bureaucracies. It sustained the memory of the tribe, group, or nation, not of the individual. As the means of writing (and later photography) were democratized, the individual was able to create and sustain personal rather than collective memories and thus construct and maintain an identity that achieved a measure of independence from the group. This is also one of the many ways private life through the modern period became valorized and public life demoted.

Pursuing this line of development into the age of digital media, a paradox comes into focus. We have never been able to document our lives so thoroughly as we now can with the help of digital tools, yet we feel that time is out of joint and that we've lost the thread of both our personal and collective histories. We appear to be both obsessive documenters of our experience, yet largely indifferent to or overwhelmed by the archives we create. We have ever more access to the past, but we are unable to bring it meaningfully to bear on the present.

This is not surprising. Plato identified similar dynamics when he offered his critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*: While writing would allow far more knowledge to be preserved and accessed, it would also relieve individuals of the burden of sustaining collective memory themselves. Like writing and print, our use of digital media ordinarily generates an archive (as well as a trail of data, often invisible to users but of great value to others). But although digital media appears to sustain memory, it is more like oral communication in its evanescence. The feed of our tweets and status updates recedes not as quickly and decisively as the spoken word, but with a similar effect. Under the guise of pervasive documentation, the architecture of digital platforms sanctions forgetting, while preoccupying us with instantaneity. It is not currently this era or this year, but rather this day or even this hour. To live on social media is to be sucked into a hyper-extended present, upon which the past only occasionally impinges.

Certain platforms and apps do periodically foreground portions of our archive, but they do so artificially—like “on this day” alerts in photo apps or memory notifications on Facebook reminding you of when you became “friends” with someone. The narrative thread is lost. Distant and recent past blur; last year was another world.

### *The View from Everywhere*

The Digital City disabuses its citizens of a key myth that structured our shared political space: that modern institutions are neutral, that they enjoy a god's-eye view of reality. The modern scientific enterprise, the press, the university, the justice system, the free market, the technological systems that ordered the modern world, even reason itself were understood as neutral instruments of the common good. In the Digital City, the neutrality of the common good, and so the very notion of the common good, are called into question. The clearest symptom of this may be the mounting challenges to the traditional liberal order and its key institutions, as well as the sudden and dramatic disrepute of the idea of centrism and political compromise.

In the Digital City, it is increasingly difficult to believe in the neutrality or objectivity of these institutions. This is not because arguments against the liberal order have won the day. Indeed, to believe as much would be to assume that the Analog City still rules. Rather, our trouble believing in neutrality is in part because of the new arrangement of social relations through digital media, which sustains the proliferation of niche identities and brings these into volatile proximity with one another. This new social order is hyper-pluralistic, a place of ceaseless and irresolvable conflict. Our identities take shape as we self-select into ever more narrow subcultures, and we are then drawn together in public forums lacking a sense of a greater whole to which we might all belong.

The effect is a deeper experience of plurality, without any countervailing centripetal forces. Sundered into multiplicity and without recourse to a common narrative thread, we are bereft of a view of the world held in common. Civility, consensus, and compromise take on the character of fantasies entertained by the naïve or foisted on the public by a self-interested elite.

### **The Self Does Not Compute**

The new condition of the self in the Digital City may come into clearer view if we draw on Walter Benjamin's 1939 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," as some of his ideas about art also apply now to our digitally crafted identities. The best known element of Benjamin's essay is his discussion of a work of art's "aura"—its material and historical uniqueness, its authenticity and authority as the only original there is. "In even the most perfect reproduction," Benjamin argues, "*one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place."

So it is with the experience of the self in the age of its digital reproducibility. When I encounter digital reproductions of the self, my own or that of others, their physical presence is neither here nor now.

There are at least two consequences. First, digital reproductions of the self do not elicit the moral recognition that attends the embodied self in the here and now. I can tear a reproduction of a Rembrandt without repercussion and without much hesitation; I cannot do so with an original. So I might feel myself at liberty to tear into a digital reproduction of a person in a way that I would not if he or she were present before me.

Second, in the age of digital reproducibility, the self no longer appears unique; the romantic idea of some ineffable essence that is me loses its power. The self that is rendered computable, and thus legible to the tools of computation, is an impoverished self, one whose aura has dissipated.

We can further draw on Benjamin's discussion of what he calls the "optical unconscious," the capacity of cameras to reveal what the unaided eye cannot perceive:

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. And just as enlargement not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly "in any case," but brings to light entirely new structures of matter, slow motion not only reveals familiar aspects of movements, but discloses quite unknown aspects within them.

Just as what is uncovered by film was unknown but always there, so, too, does digital media reveal aspects of our social experience that were always there but not always perceived. But what digital media reveals about the character and quality of social life, it also transforms.

Take for instance the identity of those with whom I associate. When I moved to a new city to take my first job after college, there was no practical way for someone I met to peruse the names and interests of my high school and college friends. My analog social network, something I myself might not have been able to map well, was not immediately accessible to new acquaintances. Today, unless I take deliberate steps to prevent it, my social networks are easily accessible and searchable. My prior associations are no longer hidden from view, and their power to define me in a new setting is no longer entirely up to me. What is revealed of me also transforms me.

Consider, too, how we present ourselves online. As sociologist Erving Goffman observed in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), we have always managed our impressions in keeping with the nature of our social settings. An attentive observer who followed me around from one

such setting to another might be able to identify these often subtle modulations of my self-presentation, modulations to which I myself might have become oblivious. But now that social life has been digitized, I become keenly aware of myself engaging in the work of impression management, and I know, or at least I suspect, that everyone else is involved in the same activity. As a result, we experience the digital self as an artificial construct or, worse, as a self-interested manipulation of social relations.

The digitization of social life has also enabled us to trace the detailed movements of ideas and influences, making it difficult to think of ourselves as spontaneous, original actors in our own dramas. Again, keen observers might have always been able to trace such lines, but now we are all overtly conscious of the flows of social capital, and we have receipts. The social dynamics that were once shrouded in forgiving shadows of obscurity have now become transparent. Transparency itself has become a virtue. What do we have to hide, anyway? But this is misguided. Transparency of this sort can be unforgiving and unrelenting. It can exhaust and demoralize. It threatens intimacy and risks transforming our relationships into social-Darwinist struggles for survival. We have gained a heightened awareness and self-consciousness of the mechanics and machinations of social life.

The databases of memory, the revealed traces of social life, a view of the self not as a thing to be disclosed but rather marketed: together they generate an intolerable ironic load. They lend all social interactions the quality of a self-interested and inescapable game in which all participants are to some degree acting in bad faith. Under these conditions, to credit the Other's appeals to public-spiritedness as genuine rather than a guise for self-interest, to believe that he truly has the common good in view, requires a great leap of faith.

### **Chastened Expectations**

One way to understand our moment is to recognize that digital technology is reconfiguring the nature of the self that enters into the political arena, even as it restructures the arena itself. The contrast between those who mainly inhabit the Digital City and those who still primarily inhabit the Analog City becomes increasingly stark. Simple appeals to conventions and solutions grounded in the Analog City now ring hollow. The old virtues and ideals, as well as the institutions they sustained, have lost their purchase on the imagination. They have lost their "self-evident" character. Like the early moderns, our reigning world picture has shattered and we

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are casting about for new ways of building consensus, new ways of coping with the challenges of pluralism, new ways of ordering society toward the common good. At the moment, however, it appears that digital media tends toward political and epistemic fragmentation, not consensus, and toward the implausibility of any substantive account of the common good. In other words, it may be that things will get worse before they get better.

In a 1982 talk on the cultural and political consequences of computation, Ivan Illich issued a warning that is even more urgent today:

The machine-like behavior of people chained to electronics constitutes a degradation of their well-being and of their dignity which, for most people in the long run, becomes intolerable. Observations of the sickening effect of programmed environments show that people in them become indolent, impotent, narcissistic and apolitical. The political process breaks down, because people cease to be able to *govern* themselves; they demand to be *managed*.

We have focused on how digital media transforms the subjective experience of individuals. The political corollary is that it enables and empowers regimes of algorithmic governance, predictive analytics, and social credit. The profound erosion of trust in the Digital City leaves a vacuum, and we look to our tools to fill it. We seem set upon interlocking trajectories: of ever greater swaths of the human experience being computationally managed, and of intractable human subjects increasingly breaking down or revolting against these conditions.

From another vantage point, however, we might see this as a hopeful moment, full of promise and opportunity. Another path also seems possible. Freed from certain unsustainable illusions about the nature of the self and the world, we may now be called back to reckon with reality in a new, more chastened and more responsible manner. It is possible that the Promethean aspirations that characterized the modern self and modern society may now yield to a more sober assessment of the limits within which genuine human flourishing might occur. It is possible, too, that we may learn once again the necessity of virtues, public and private—that we will no longer, as T. S. Eliot put it, be “dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.”