



The Zombification of the Public Forum

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Abstract

The all-encompassing nature of digital technology has killed society's public forum and resurrected it into a zombie. Tracing the public forum from its historical roots to the age of social media, this analysis highlights how the advent of digital technology has fundamentally altered the nature of the public forum. Social theorists including Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Ellul, and Sherry Turkle are invoked to show how the nature of the new digital public forum is distinct from centuries past, exerting its efficient yet dysfunctional influence over human communication and connection. With technological innovations like the internet and social media that foster discourse, the digital public forum is as loud and active as ever. But this resurrection is not organic. Because of the nature of digital technology and how human interaction is mediated through it, this new public forum is zombie-like. Crucially, the public forum in the digital realm exists in a state of constant contradictions. It features and fractures democratic deliberation, connection, and identity. While powerful, ever-expanding, and a lively setting for political discussion and social interaction, the public forum is nonetheless a shell of itself, having lost the crucial human element of organic connection, much like a zombie brought to life in its original body but without the human spirit that defines it. It will take a concerted effort among the public to reclaim it.

Keywords: *public forum, public sphere, public square, social media, internet, digital technology, disembodiment, digital sociology*

Suggested Citation (ASA):

Brown, Christopher. 2026. "The Zombification of the Public Forum." *Social Thought and Research* 38. <https://doi.org/10.17161/star.v38i.23075>

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The public forum, a cornerstone of democratic society, facilitates the exchange of ideas to shape collective will and guide governance. Jürgen Habermas (1992) conceptualizes this as the public sphere – a communicative space defined by open access, equality among participants, and deliberative discourse. These components underscore the public forum's role in fostering rational debate essential to democracy. However, Nancy Fraser (1990) critiques this model as overly idealistic, highlighting its failure to account for social inequalities and the presence of multiple, often exclusionary, public spheres influenced by power disparities.

The advent of digital technologies has transformed the public forum, amplifying its reach while introducing dysfunctions. Scholars like Benson (2009), Eisenegger and Schäfer (2023), and Seeliger and Sevignani (2022) note that digital platforms reshape public discourse, yet uncertainties persist about their democratic implications. This analysis tackles these gaps by posing two key questions: How does the digital public forum simultaneously feature and fracture democratic processes? Similarly, how does it feature and fracture social connection and identity? It also introduces “Zombification” as a lens to explore these paradoxes and differentiate the digital public forum from its traditional predecessor. Grounded in Habermas's (1992) and Fraser's (1990) normative frameworks, this analysis examines the digital public forum's evolving role. But despite its abstract architecture, concrete examples show the dynamic nature of the public forum in the digital age through the dimensions of democratic deliberation and connection and identity in the sections that follow.

DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION

The first feature, democratic deliberation, lies at the heart of Jürgen Habermas' theory. He famously describes the public forum as “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (1992:176). It is understood as a place where all people have access and public opinion is formed. Habermas views the public forum as democracy in work: “through the vehicle of public opinion, it put the state in touch with the needs of society” (1992:31). This democratic nature of the public forum is important because it assumes an openness among the citizenry. The public forum is not exclusive to only certain citizens, rather all can equally participate (Habermas 1996). Of course, this normative conception of the public forum's democratic ideals should be seen not as a rigid definition, but rather as a Weberian ideal type of modernity's general trend toward how we collectively communicate today.

In the modern world, societies with open democracies generally have the most robust and active public spheres (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Norris 2000). For example, the United States supports lively and contentious debate on issues ranging from abortion to gun rights to the death penalty, and everything in-between. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution fosters such open debate, protecting the right of all people to express themselves and collectively protest. On an almost daily basis in the United States, one can find communities actively discussing and debating social issues and public policies in public demonstrations, town

halls, school board meetings, community centers, and university classrooms. In the ideal sense, rational discourse and honest dialogue between individuals underpin this modern, public forum.

Habermas recognized this modern, bourgeois public forum as historically unique. While there have been other distinct instantiations of the public forum from antiquity to the Middle Ages, none have had the crucial element of open and public discussion that we experience today, divorced from the authority and supervision of the state or sovereign (Habermas 1992). In contrast, the public forum in modern society is characterized by “private individuals assembled into a public body” which often have the effect of criticizing authority (Habermas 1992:52). This open and democratic nature of the modern, bourgeois public forum is the crucial difference that separates it from public forums in preceding historical epochs. In the past, citizens who openly criticized a feudal sovereign could face severe, even fatal, punishments. In today’s public forum, public criticism or mockery of political leaders is legally protected and considered culturally important.

This, to Habermas, is democracy in action – where the public forum is ruled by uncoerced deliberation and rational discourse. However, Habermas’ ideal public forum is not without its critiques. For example, with their elevated social position, the bourgeois public forum has historically been dominated by middle-class, property-owning men, leaving working-class, racial minorities, and women excluded from deliberation and thus subject to the public forum’s consensus. (Fraser 1990; Negt and Kluge 1990).

In addition to its exclusion of the subaltern, the public forum in modern decades has lost some of its democratic ideals. Despite being characterized by democratic participation and organic opinion forming, the public forum under consumer capitalism often promotes private interests over the public good. For instance, the formation of public opinion on any given issue has undergone a tremendous change from an open and democratic forum to a small number of special interest groups which carry a disproportionate influence on the outcome of public opinion (Bernays and Miller 2004; Herman and Chomsky 1988). Mass media, advertising, and lobby groups have all co-opted the public forum in some way to benefit small interests, divorced from the process of democratic, public discourse.

These critiques have generated a now near ubiquitous consensus among scholars that the singular model of a public forum is outdated (Breese 2011; Eisenegger and Schäfer 2023). Rather, “multiple but unequal publics participate” in civil society (Fraser 1990:70). This may be especially true in the digital era, where participation is more decentralized, transnational, and marked by competing groups (Hoskins 2014; Kaiser and Rauchfleisch 2019; Volkmer 2019). This analysis, however, is compatible with both a singular and multiple public forum model. As will be shown, the features/fractures inherent in the digital realm exist regardless of how the public forum is conceptualized.

CONNECTION AND IDENTITY

The second feature of the public forum is connection and identity. If democratic deliberation is the heart of the public forum, then connection and identity is the lifeblood. Through the public forum, connection and identity give meaning to the social world. Connection and identity formation are both the requirements and the effects of a vibrant public forum.

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Fraser (1990) makes clear the importance of this feature: “public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion;... they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities” Fraser (1990:68). She explains that “public discursive arenas are among the most important and under-recognized sites in which social identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed” (Fraser 1990:79). These “public discursive arenas” are the location(s) for communication about non-trivial political and social issues. Coming together to communicate these issues is a crucial aspect of both individual and collective identity (Fraser 1990; Mouffe 2005; Peters 1997; Seeliger and Sevignani 2022).

This fundamental connection between identity and social deliberation is supported in social science literature. Cooley (1902), Mead (1934), Goffman (1959), and others have established that societies require communication and interaction with others to formulate individual and collective identity. Simply put, connection and identity are fundamental not only for participation in the public forum but also social well-being. As will be shown, connection and identity are becoming increasingly fractured in the digital realm.

DISCUSSION

The Digital Realm

The physical settings of the public forum have varied materially across time and space. Modern streets, sidewalks, community centers, as well as pre-industrial salons and coffee-houses have all fostered public debate and discussion. No matter the setting of the public forum, it, nonetheless, exists in a material space and time. Public forums of the past were generally predictable and stable events in which the settings and actors are available for all participants and observers to see, hear, and know. However, with the invention of the internet, and particularly social media platforms, the nature of the public forum has fundamentally changed.

Within the last few decades computerized technology has infiltrated all aspects of social life, causing a paradigm shift in how humans interact with one another. It became possible to instantly send and receive information across vast distances anywhere in the world. Social media has forever changed how people (including anonymous strangers) meet, interact, develop relationships, understand the world, and understand themselves.

The digital public forums of social media and the internet more broadly, exist in the context of the technological takeover of the human realm. Jacques Ellul (1964) understands technology to transform all elements of civilization, including the digital public forum. “Modern technology has become a total phenomenon for civilization, the defining force of a new social order in which efficiency is no longer an option but a necessity imposed on all human activity” (Ellul 1964: 17). Modern technology is all-encompassing. There is no aspect of society or any social process untouched. Not only the public forum, but everything, including science, religion, health, politics, and education, is subject to the dominating logic of efficiency.

Ellul calls this phenomenon “technique” (1964), and it is the defining feature of modern society. It is “the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity” (Ellul 1964: xxv). Not surprisingly,

the digital public forum has been thoroughly shaped by this ruling milieu of technique. The internet and social media are predicated on efficiency. With the ability to simulate the traditional public forum, instant connection and communication mark this new frontier, without the limitation of space and time. While it has no doubt made social life more convenient in many ways, the destabilizing effects on society and people are evident.

As such, the digital public forum should not be conceptualized as a tool that people create and use to an end. Ellul joins Langdon Winner (1977) in understanding that technology is not a neutral force molded by people in a one-directional relationship. On the contrary, technique guarantees that people adapt to technology and re-organize society under the principle of efficiency. Thus, the assumed one-directional relationship is more so the opposite way, where technique is not truly controlled by anything, but compels people to adapt to it. Winner calls this principle “autonomous technology” (1995), and it is driving society toward a “technological determinism” (Ellul 1990). Efficiency, therefore, has a totalizing effect on society, even to the point of defining humanity.

For example, participation in the digital realm is becoming more of a requirement if one wants to live and thrive in a modern world. It becomes increasingly difficult to gain employment, access information, socially connect, and foster relationships if one chooses to live without the internet and cell phones. Thus, technology, particularly the digital public forum, is not a value-neutral entity. It compels social behavior while at the same time it is naturally driven forward by itself. For instance, almost any scientific achievement or solution to a social problem comes alongside an increase in technology, not a step away from it. Ellul argues that “the present-day ideology of science is an ideology of salvation ... Science alone holds the future to our society” (Ellul 1990:182, as cited in Hanks and Hanks 2015).

Ellul’s strong opinions about technology’s impact on society are seen vividly with the prominence and totalizing nature of the internet. However, the digital public forum, ruled by technique and the value of efficiency, does not necessarily represent a defeat for humanity and its platform to communicate. The situation is nuanced, with positive and negative aspects interacting in a continuing contradiction.

Zombie-like Contradictions

The nature of this new digital public forum has profound implications for discourse in society. By mimicking the face-to-face, physical interaction of the traditional public forum, the internet and social media are marked by internal contradictions in ways that previous public forums were not. These contradictions fundamentally change the nature of the public forum in the digital realm. While acting as an extension of the traditional public forum, speech in the digital realm has fundamentally lost the human element. The digital public forum is like a zombie, loudly presenting as a new and improved self-created element of humanity not bound by space and time, but also dead inside, marked by internal contradictions often antithetical to human well-being. Figure 1 visualizes the distinctions between traditional and digital public forums.

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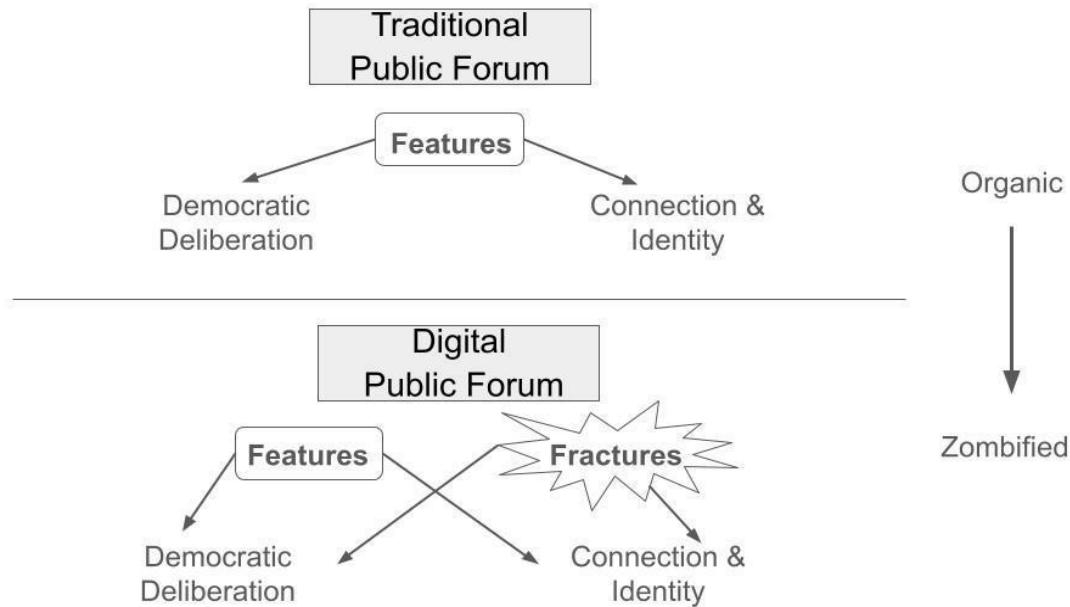


Figure 1: Traditional versus Digital Public Forum Fractures

Features and Fractures: Democratic Deliberation

Democratic deliberation has expanded in the digital realm. Increasingly, people from all over the world can transcend geographic boundaries to connect and communicate – often freely or at low cost – in a continuing democratic process that bolsters the public forum. No other innovation has pulled more people into the public forum and amplified democratic discourse, than digital technology.

The massive increase in the digital connection of cross-national, diverse people has also had the effect of decentralizing information streams, allowing for a multiplicity of viewpoints and topics of concern. Consistent with the multiple public forum model (Breese 2011), these points of public interest have spawned “counterpublics” (Fraser 1990; Kavada and Poell 2021).

Fraser refers to these counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1990: 67). While often seen in the way subaltern groups strive to gain recognition amidst dominating groups, counterpublics can also be dysfunctional and anti-democratic, leading to radicalism and extremism (Fraser 1990; Kaiser and Rauchfleisch 2019). Regardless of their ethical value, however, counterpublics nonetheless “expand discursive space” (Fraser, 1990:67). This expansion is evident with even a brief glance at the internet’s diverse social and political atmosphere.

Blooming alongside cultural and ideological diversity, counterpublics have led to numerous social movements which could have only been possible in the digital realm. For example, the Arab Spring and #MeToo are two examples of social movements to have successfully utilized digital platforms to spread awareness around their message throughout the

Arab and Western worlds, respectively. Thanks to the unique ability to go viral in the digital realm, information can rapidly spread, allowing for broader and more immediate democratic deliberation.

Despite the achievement of expanding democratic deliberation in the digital public forum, this ideal is fundamentally fractured on two accounts. Firstly, online social media forums are privately owned and thus are not subject to requiring First Amendment protection for its users. As such, private owners can construct parameters around acceptable speech allowing social media platforms to censor speech or expel speakers that fall outside these parameters. Secondly, a large percentage of the global population does not have internet access and is thus completely excluded from participating in the digital public forum. The lion's share of the debate and discussion online occurs in a few social media platforms, namely Meta (Facebook and Instagram), X, WeChat, YouTube, and Reddit (among others). All of these are private corporations resembling a public forum in some fashion. Each is tasked with setting appropriate parameters of speech that necessarily constrict the content of discussion and the subsequent formation of public opinion.

For example, every major social media platform uniformly banned President Donald Trump from their platforms for his perceived role in the U.S. Capitol riots on January 6th, 2021. And in the height of Covid-19 pandemic, X (at the time Twitter) banned over 11,000 personal accounts for violating their policies regarding speech, questioning the safety and efficacy of newly created vaccines, claims of fraud in the 2020 Presidential Election, and QAnon conspiracy theories (Thompson 2022). Moreover, when Elon Musk acquired Twitter to create a free-speech centered platform, controversial speaker Alex Jones was initially banned but later allowed on the platform. The reversal of this decision emphasizes the struggle for online platforms to set consistent and fair speech parameters.

While some may applaud the limitation of controversial speech, the digital public forum is nonetheless inherently undemocratic given that the parameters for acceptable speech are controlled by a few individuals, whose decisions impact billions. Unlike in the traditional public forum, where unpopular, offensive, or even hateful speech has legal protection, speech on digital platforms is subject to restriction and removal by the discretion of each digital platform, with no avenue for recourse. The co-optation of corporate control of the public forum in this way echoes Habermas' concept of re-feudalization (1992). Social media corporations sell the idea of an open platform where discussion and debate are untouched, allowing for social opinion to be formed, but this can only happen within the context of acceptable speech.

Thus, social media corporations give the illusion of providing a public forum, but this forum is subject to the corporate logic of generating profit, as all corporations are. Much attention has been drawn to social media corporations' fiduciary responsibility to the public (Collins, Marichal, and Neve 2020; Cramer 2020; Giannelos 2023), and even interest in reframing these giant corporate platforms as public utilities (Andrejevic 2013). Still, barring any momentous shifts in the socio-political landscape, social media corporations will remain private and profit driven.

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In addition, there exists no major digital public forum without this corporate logic – all recognizable social media are corporations. They own and control the means of communication online; there is no alternative for anything else resembling a public forum in the digital realm. To be sure, there have always been alternatives that people create and seek out that are more open and democratic than hegemonic social media platforms such as Facebook and X. But for any alternative platform to scale up and reach anything resembling a public forum, the costs involved require profit to be the driving motivator.

Thus, an entire apparatus of technocratic control emerges with content moderators and misinformation experts who constrain speech and speakers at the behest of investors, shareholders, advertisers, even governments. Ellul echoes the anti-democratic nature of the technological society, and by extension, the digital public forum in what he refers to as the “the technological bluff” (1990). Ellul (1990: xvi) broadly defines the technological bluff as:

...the gigantic bluff in which discourse on techniques envelops us, making us believe anything and, far worse, changing our whole attitude to techniques: the bluff of politicians, the bluff of the media, the bluff of technicians when they talk about technique instead of working at them, the bluff of publicity, the bluff of economic models.

The corporate control of not only social media platforms, but also for most activity on the internet, reveals the technocratic bluff of the digital public forum. So, while the promise of life in the digital realm is utopian-like, where democracy thrives in the abstract, it is, in practice, an exercise in “monitoring, predicting, and managing citizen behavior” (Hanks and Hanks 2015: 468).

If there is ever a bid to make a social media platform more open and democratic, profit is rarely on the chopping block. The converse is also true; generating profit necessitates limiting undesirable speech and speakers. Outside of an epoch beyond capitalism, it is doubtful that reconciling the conflict between the promise of the public forum and the profit motive is even possible. What remains are a few behemoth social media corporations that dominate the digital public forum by sacrificing democratic ideals on the all-holy altar of profit.

This technocratic logic of setting speech parameters in accordance with profit motive is not the only reason the digital public forum is undemocratic. Every person being able to participate is a major assumption of what defines the public forum, yet this is not the case in the digital realm. For instance, an attractive feature of a digital public forum is that it is assumed to be international, totally transcending the limitations of spatial and national boundaries by connecting anyone from anywhere in the world. Yet, of a global population over 8 billion people, only a little over half use the internet and social media, 5.18 and 4.8 billion, respectively (Petrosyan 2023). In addition, this digital divide is not evenly distributed among different countries and cultures. For example, over 99% of the population in Saudi Arabia, Norway, and the United Arab Emirates use the internet daily, while in the world’s most populous country, India, the number drops to around 50% (Petrosyan 2023). In North Korea, the internet is severely restricted with only a few thousand privileged members allowed access, leaving over 25 million completely isolated from the rest of the world (Burgess 2023).

Over the past few decades, internet access has grown steadily, but billions of people remain entirely cut off from online life. This creates a fundamental contradiction in the digital public forum. It promises to unite the global population on an open platform for dialogue and democratic opinion-forming, yet that dialogue is inevitably shaped and constrained by corporate logic, and only those fortunate enough to have internet access can participate.

Features and Fractures: Connection and Identity

The second, and most consequential, contradiction of the digital public forum is the nature of connection itself. The internet, particularly social media, allows for almost unlimited social connection. People can reach out and connect to those whom they have never met, in a place they have never known, and they can create and develop (sometimes) intense relationships online. But despite overcoming these incredible hurdles, the nature of human connection, and the subsequent formation of identity, is fundamentally fractured in the digital realm.

While social connection has unquestionably been amplified by digital technology, the crucial communicative process is largely absent. The back-and-forth process necessary to construct the digital public forum is completely mediated by technology. The normal way of connecting, namely by face-to-face verbal and non-verbal communication, has been replaced by on-screen videos or text-based messages or posts that people create, read, and send at their leisure. The traditional act of communication is in real time a back-and-forth “game” that in the search for truth and understanding has an inherent “risk” to it (Gadamer 1960). This game has its own dynamic nature to it, generated from, yet independent of, the participants involved (Vilhauer 2013). Our own perspectives of the world and of ourselves are at risk of changing when we play this communicative game. This is what makes communicating in real life so profound. One cannot escape the “game”; it is the foundation of all traditional communication.

In contrast, digital communication lacks the real time, face-to-face “game.” This separation creates disembodiment, characterized by a fundamental separation between oneself and others (Murphy 2022 and Zaner 1964). The back-and-forth “game” is gone. In its place is a simulacrum (Baudrillard 1994), a synthetic copy of the original communicative process. While this digitally mediated communication can be seen as a much more efficient version of the public forum, it lacks the fundamental, organic nature of how humans have traditionally connected and communicated.

Still, the distortion is powerful and compelling. It increasingly blurs the distinction between actual and virtual reality and marks the desire to transcend the limitations of the physical realm (Buongiorno 2019). This distortion between space/time and organic bodies transforms how people interact and develop a sense of self. As activity in the digital realm grows, so does its effect on people.

Social activity online is a new frontier in the formation of one’s identity. In the digital world one can be free from the limitations of one’s own physical body, which can be represented in a myriad of ways that do not reflect reality. Untethering the self from the body can provide relief for some, especially around adolescence where the self, or multiple selves, are constantly

being explored (Turkle 1999). This echoes Erikson's seminal concept of a "psychosocial moratorium," or a phase during adolescence with intense interactions with people and ideas combined with a pause on consequences (1950). The internet and social media provide many opportunities to engage in this fluid and dynamic interaction between bodiless selves.

While some feel a sense of relief that interacting in the digital realm provides, others experience a sense of fragmentation (Turkle 1999). This profoundly impacts the sense of self and formation of identity because the body is the self (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Zaner 1964). Thus, it is common to experience a sense of disembodiment when separation, purposeful or not, occurs. While the modes of interacting online can certainly mimic organic interaction offline (Papacharissi 2012), the effects of shifting social life into the digital realm can be dramatically different.

The rise of digital technology, particularly the internet, represents a pivotal shift in human history, redefining how people communicate and connect. This transition from embodied, face-to-face interaction to disembodied, digitally mediated communication has accelerated in recent decades, raising concerns about its psychological consequences. Social presence theory (Short, Williams, and Christie 1976) provides a useful framework for understanding this shift. They posit that communication media vary in their capacity to convey social cues (e.g., tone, facial expressions, and physical presence) essential for fostering intimacy and immediacy. The move toward digital platforms, which often lack the richness of organic communication, may undermine psychological well-being, as evidenced by rising rates of mental illness in the digital age.

Mental illness, encompassing a spectrum of psychological distress from anxiety to depression, has become increasingly prevalent in modern society. Twenge et al. (2018) document a sharp increase in depressive symptoms and suicide-related outcomes among U.S. adolescents between 2010 and 2017, correlating with the proliferation of smartphones and social media. Similarly, the World Health Organization (WHO 2022) reported a 25% global surge in depression and anxiety following the Covid-19 pandemic, a period marked by an unprecedented reliance on digital communication tools due to social distancing measures. While multiple factors contribute to these trends, the correlation with increased digital technology use warrants scrutiny.

Historical linguistic analysis further supports this linkage. Bollen et al. (2021) examined 120 years of language records and identified a marked rise in cognitive distortions – negative thought patterns associated with mental distress – beginning in the late 1990's, coinciding with widespread internet adoption. This surge reached unprecedented levels by the 2010's, exceeding any prior period in their dataset. Although causality remains elusive, the authors point to socioeconomic shifts, technological advancements, and social media as likely contributors. This suggests that the psychological toll of digital communication may stem, in part, from its tendency to amplify distorted perceptions of reality (Short et al. 1976).

The impact is particularly pronounced among youth, who have grown up immersed in digital environments. A 2022 Pew Research Center survey found that 97% of U.S. teenagers use the internet daily, with 46% reporting near-constant use up from 92% and 24%, respectively

in 2014–2015 (Vogel, Gelles-Watnick, and Massarat 2022). Smartphone ownership among teens has also risen, from 73% in 2014–2015 to 95% in 2022, enabling instant access to digital platforms. This rapid immersion raises critical questions about its developmental consequences. Drawing on social presence theory, the diminished social cues in digital interactions may hinder the formation of secure attachments and emotional regulation, skills honed through in-person communication.

Empirical research underscores these concerns. A meta-analysis by Huang (2017) of 63 studies found a small but significant positive correlation between social media use and symptoms of depression and anxiety, particularly among frequent users. More recently, Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2019) conducted a systematic review linking excessive social media use to heightened risks of internalizing disorders, with perceived social isolation being a key mediator (Primack et al. 2017). This aligns with social presence theory: digital platforms, despite their connectivity, often fail to replicate the intimacy and immediacy of physical interaction, fostering feelings of loneliness and disconnection.

The mounting evidence has spurred action from public health authorities. In 2023, the American Psychological Association issued a health advisory on adolescent social media use, citing its potential to exacerbate psychological distress (APA 2023). Concurrently, former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy highlighted a decade-long spike in youth sadness and hopelessness, an increase of nearly 40% from 2012 to 2022 (Surgeon General Advisory Report 2023; Ritchel 2023). This report labeled social media use among adolescents “the defining public health issue of our time.” Twenge et al. (2021) further corroborate this, linking loneliness with greater smartphone access and internet use.

The shift from organic to digital communication, framed through social presence theory, reveals a mechanism for the observed rise in psychological suffering. While digital technology offers undeniable efficiencies, its limitations in fostering social presence may erode the quality of human connection, particularly for young people. The integration of robust studies spanning longitudinal trends, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews, strengthens the case that this technological inflection point carries significant mental health implications, urging a reevaluation of our reliance on synthetic forms of interaction.

Though the digital realm fundamentally fractures connection and identity, it simultaneously expands them, bolstering the public forum. Social media, for example, transforms communication into a decentralized exchange, departing from the top-down model that legacy media provided for decades. This rhizomatic structure of the internet facilitates social connection to those outside of one’s milieu, something near impossible without the aid of digital technology adopted *en masse*. Moreover, it opens doors to communities, both online and off, centered around social and political issues on topics that span the range of human creativity.

These communities—whether facilitated on social media giants, smaller chat rooms, or organized digitally before spilling into the physical world—carry profound social potential. They rally around specific causes, offer religious minorities a space to worship, or allow victims of domestic abuse a lifeline of support while also linking broader bonds, like sharing political ideas

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among millions. Undeniably, digital technology has amplified the public forum's reach and significance.

This paradox – simultaneously featuring and fracturing connection and identity – makes participation in the digital public forum deeply significant, particularly for youth. Sherry Turkle (1984) highlights a key distinction: while adults engage computers with settled perspectives, youth wield them as tools “in the process of world and identity construction” (Turkle 1984: 165). Thus, the digital realm has an enormous effect on how young people perceive the world outside their own experiences, how they learn to connect and interact with others, and how they understand themselves. Unlike adults, whose identities and worldviews are more fixed, youth remain malleable, subject to the influence of digital technology – both by what it offers and by its inherent effects.

To adolescents, learning to socialize within this digital technology may seem like a normal stage in their own development into adulthood, a maturing process that everyone goes through, naively assuming the technology is mature (Turkle 2011). But of course, this is far from true. The internet, and especially social media, are in their infancy when compared to any other technology that has historically changed society to the same degree. What people experience when participating in the digital public forum is not and has never been normal.

Ironically, however, participation in the normless digital public forum is becoming increasingly normal. Turkle (2011) introduces the term “realtechnik” to describe mediums that can both distance us from humanity and serve as a normalized stage for connection. Turkle urges skepticism about linear progress, for good or bad, with new technology and always reconsider and reassess the impact on society. She is in line with Habermas (1992) and Ellul (1990) in stating that technology, and more broadly modernity, is irreversible. People must work within the milieu they find themselves in, not withdraw or dismantle it.

CONCLUSION: THE PRINTING PRESS 2.0?

The advancement of technology is not inherently a deterministic factor advancing humanity and having a uniform impact on the social world. Notably, the invention and diffusion of the radio and the television throughout the 20th century changed society (via the public forum) significantly. The closest comparison to the impact of the internet and digital technology on modern society is the invention of the printing press in the 15th century (Bawden and Robinson 2000; Mun 2013).

Gutenberg's invention allowed for the ability to document events and spread ideas with unrivaled efficiency. Eisenstein (1979) famously makes the case that the printing press was the prime causal agent of the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution, along with their destabilizing effects on society. With avenues of communication multiplying and ideas and information spreading at a rate never seen before, European social and political life was dramatically altered. The societal shift from script to print fractured global normality and changed the course of human history.

But the printing press' impact on society did not happen overnight. It took over three years to print 200 copies, and most people at the time were illiterate (Roos 2023; Dewar 1998).

Yet the seeds were planted for the radical transformation of society. In a similar way, digital technology has been ongoing for decades but the rate of evolution from its inception is already dramatic. Moreover, internet-based communication is far more powerful than the printing press. Whatever disruption the printing press brought to 15th century Europe, digital technology is on pace to not just mirror but far exceed it in our time and on a global scale.

Digital technology and the internet have the power to change humanity in profound ways. Digital communication, while synthetic, is almost unlimited in scope and scale. Information processing and analysis are growing at an exponential rate, and we have the near totality of human-generated knowledge inside a device that fits in our pockets. The ability of the internet to transform society dwarfs the impact of the printing press. But despite the almost unlimited possibilities of the internet's effect on society, we struggle to predict with any accuracy what comes next.

The blind foresight means there are many unintended consequences that we are forced to deal with retrospectively. For instance, few if any predicted that packet switching computers onto a single network would lead to the mass adoption of the internet, a place where people increasingly live their lives in a continuing separation of humanity from nature. But despite this separation, people are inherently social with a base need to connect and communicate. Thus, we created the internet and social media platforms which constitute the new digital public forum. How this trend eventually plays out remains a mystery, as we are in the early stage of this historical phenomenon.

Thanks to digitally mediated technology, science fiction ideas from the past, like augmented virtual reality and artificial intelligence (AI), are now realities. They may indeed drive society forward. But how people interact is a more fundamental yet often ignored mystery in the digital realm. What is the future of the digital public forum, and how will it impact human communication? What are the parameters of acceptable speech in the digital realm, and do they differ from the traditional forum? Is the internet a new kind of human-created nature, qualitatively different but no less important than the forests and the plains, as Smith (2022) posits? Is it no more than a simulacrum? Jurgenson critiques the concept of digital dualism, claiming that there is no fundamental separation between the digital and organic world (2012). Could it be that all differences will boil away as digital reality becomes increasingly adapted into all aspects of social life? There is evidence that internet usage fundamentally alters our brains (Carr 2010; Firth et al. 2019; Kühn and Gallinat 2015); what implications does this have for us as a biological species?

These are pressing questions, yet our general acquiescence puts us on a one-way path to wherever digital technology takes us. The nature of how we connect and communicate are fundamental aspects of what it means to be human. This analysis seeks to confront the reality of our new zombified public forum and wrestle the conversation away from a dominating narrative that portrays us as passive players, forced to adapt to whatever technology provides for us despite how inevitable the digital takeover may be. On the contrary, crucial issues relating to the public forum must be at the forefront of political and social life.

THE ZOMBIFICATION OF THE PUBLIC FORUM

What separates this zombified notion of the public forum from other conceptions of the Habermasian model in the digital age is not that the internet simply transforms the public forum into a digitized mirror of whatever society creates. The implication is that the digital public forum is largely static, modeled from whomever or whatever creates it. Indeed, with the advent and influence of AI, the digital public forum might become designed by something non-human. The zombified concept of public forum should be thought of as a natural and inevitable – yet unpredictable – result of modernity and what Ellul describes as the technique of technology. Notably, this digital version is highlighted by internal contradictions that not only feature core elements of the Habermasian public forum, namely democratic deliberation and connection and identity, but at the same time fractures them.

In this vein, this analysis suggests reconsidering the nature of the public forum in the digital age. Of particular importance is the zombified process of how the public forum died and was strangely resurrected into something few could have imagined, a powerful version of itself existing only in the abstract, digital realm, and marked by internal contradictions. This monster has the body of the public forum; it has become a major place for people to discuss and debate political and social issues worldwide, to form opinions and in the process, form identities. But it crucially lacks the human spirit. Through no fault of their own, billions are excluded from participating, and it is corporately owned and controlled, dictating what is or what is not acceptable to say. And it fundamentally changes the way humans connect and interact, upending hitherto normal communication. To make any progress in the public forum, society must recognize and navigate around this monster carefully.

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