Sad by Design

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On Platform Nihilism

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Introduction: Society of the Social

"There are 87,146 thought leaders on LinkedIn."—"Real painters do not paint things as they are…They paint them as they themselves feel them to be." Vincent van Gogh on fake art—Unload that Truck of Dislikes! (alt-left slogan)—"Web: We noticed you're using an Ad blocker. Me: I noticed you're using 32 tracking services." Matt Weagle—"New Security Comes With New Vulnerability." Lulzsec—"Truth is for suckers, Johnny Boy." Being John Malkovich—Our focus is the cosmo-technics challenge that brings us in direct contact with our slaves (tribute to Yuk Hui)—"I always knew I was a good writer but I thought I'd do poetry or fiction, not the emails I ended up doing." OH—"Das Handy und die Zuhanden-heit des Virtuellen" (German essay)—"One of my favorite self-harm techniques is googling airfares to Bali." Addie Wagenknecht—"It's not size, it's scale that counts." Barnett Newman—"Warning: People might not like you after this."—"Smart is the new smoking." Johanna Sjerp-stra—"Please like our DNS poisoning attack here"—"I HAVE THE HOUSE TO MYSELF TONIGHT! *stares at phone*"—"The Internet is like the Wild West. We thought we were the cowboys, but it turns out we're the buffalos." AnthroPunk.

Welcome to the New Normal. Social media is reformatting our interior lives. As platform and individual become inseparable, social networking becomes identical with the "social" itself. No longer curious about what "the next web" will bring, we chat about the information we're allowed to graze on during meager days. Forward-looking confidence has been shattered—the seasonality of hype reduced to a flatline future. Instead, a new realism has set in, as Evgeny Morozov tweeted: "1990s tech utopianism posited that networks weaken or replace hierarchies. In reality, networks amplify hierarchies and make them less visible."[1] How can one write a proper phenomenology of asynchronous connections and their cultural effects, formulate a ruthless critique of everything hardwired into the social body of the network, while not looking at what's going on inside? Rather than a stance of superiority, a judgment from on high, could we take an amoral approach toward today's intense

social media usage, delving into the shallow time of lost souls like us? Let's embark on a journey into this third space called the techno-social.

Our beloved internet may be portrayed as an "inverse hydra with a hundred assholes"[2] but we love it anyway: it's our brain-junk. While social media controversies have hit mainstream media, the fallout has been zero. We barely register the online frenzy that surrounds us; we can't even pretend to care about the cynical advertisement logic.[3] Social media scandals appear to us, as Franz Kafka once wrote, "like a path in autumn: no sooner is it cleared than it is once again littered with leaves." From behavioral manipulation to fake news, all we read about is the bankrupt credibility of Silicon Valley.

However, very few have suffered any serious consequences. Evidence is apparently not enough. Muck gets raked, data gets leaked, and whistles get blown—yet nothing changes. None of the outstanding issues get resolved. There's no "internexit" referendum ahead. No matter how many hacks and privacy violations occur, no matter how many awareness campaigns and public debates are organized, overwhelming indifference prevails. Witness the rapid return to normal following the March 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal. The centralization of infrastructure and services that provide us with so much comfort is seen as inevitable, ineluctable even.[4] Why aren't there already viable alternatives to the main platforms? Someday we'll understand the Digital Thermidor—but that "someday" never comes.

What's the fate of critique without consequences? As Franco Berardi explained to me when I visited him in Bologna to discuss this book project, it is truth that makes us sad. We lack role models and heroes. Instead we have paranoid truth-seekers. As our responses to the alt-right and systemic violence are so predictable and powerless, Franco suggested to me that we should stop speaking. No reply. Refuse to become news. Do not feed the trolls. The techno-sadness, as explained in this book, has no end, it's bottomless.

How do we reverse the acceleration of alienation, a movement that inevitably ends up in trauma? Instead of pathetic, empty gestures, we should exercise a new tactic of silence, directing the freed energy and resources toward creating temporary spaces of reflection.

In his 2018 book *Anti-Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*, Siva Vaidhyanathan struggles with the growing gap between good intentions and the ugly reality: "The painful paradox of Facebook is that the company's sincere devotion to making

the world better invited nefarious parties to hijack it to spread hatred and confusion. Zuckerberg's firm belief in his own expertise, authority, and ethical core blinded him and his company to the damage it was facilitating and causing. If Facebook had been less obsessed with making the world better, it might have avoided contributing to forces that have made the world worse."[5] See here the real existing stagnation, now that the world is digitized. As Gramsci said, "the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

On paper our global challenges look enormous; on screen they fail to be translated into our everyday life. Instead of facing the titanic forces right in the eye, we're numbed, bittersweet, absent-minded, quirky, and sometimes straight-out depressed. Should we read intense social media usage as a coping mechanism? Ours is a profoundly non-heroic, non-mythological, straight-out flat era. After all, myths are stories that need time to develop a broad audience, to ramp up their tension, and to play out their drama. No, our time is marked by the micro concerns of the fragile self. Everyone has his or her reason to shut down and shield off. While corporations can grow overnight to become behemoth structures, outlandish in their infrastructure, our understanding of the world lags behind or even shrinks.

Limited understanding limits our ability to frame the problem. We are not sick.[6] Alarmism has worn itself out. If we want to smash platform capitalism, a political economy analysis will not be sufficient. How might we construct a collective identity, a self-hermeneutics we can live with? Indeed, what would a self-image even be that went beyond machine-readable interpretations? The selfie as mask? "I love that one with you, wearing sunglasses, when you proudly smile." Unable to pin down a problem or articulate a response, the irresistible lure of swiping, updates and "Likes" seems stronger than ever. Portraying users as victims of Silicon Valley turns out not to be convincing. With Slavoj Žižek, we can say that we know social media is evil, but continue to use it. "What makes our situation so ominous, is the all pervasive sense of blockage. There is no clear way out, and the ruling elite is clearly losing its ability to rule."[7] Our environment and its operating conditions have been dramatically transformed, and yet our understanding of such dynamics lags behind. "The barbed wire remains invisible," as Evgeny Morozov once put it.

The problem has yet to be identified: there is no "social" anymore outside of social media. In Italian slang, social media has already been

shortened: "Are you on social?" This is our Society of the Social.[8] We stare at the black box, wondering about the poverty of today's interior life. To overcome the deadlock, this book sets out to integrate a radical critique. It seeks alternatives by staging a subjective encounter with the multitude and their intimate dependencies on their mobile devices.

Internet culture is exhibiting signs of an existential midlife crisis. As Julia Kristeva once wrote: "There is nothing sadder than a dead God." The newness is gone, the innovation has slowed, the user base stabilized. In contrast to 1990s nostalgia, we can't really say there was ever a happy period of young adulthood. As in most non-Western cultures, it was straight into marriage at a young age with all the restrictions that come with it. Who dares to refer to "new" media anymore? Only innocent outsiders occasionally mention this once promising term. If anything, there seems to be a rapid spread of the retrograde, a yearning for the earlier and simpler days. What are we to make of this romantic nostalgia for the birth of virtual reality, the clumsy early web interfaces, and the net.art pioneers? Claude Levi-Strauss came up with a possible explanation: "Man never creates anything truly great except at the beginning: in whatever field it may be, only the first initiative is wholly valid. The succeeding ones are characterized by hesitation and regret, and try to recover, fragment by fragment, ground that has already been left behind."[9]

This volume, the sixth in my internet chronicles,[10] struggles with a digital realm that not only blends into the everyday, but increasingly impinges upon it—contracting our abilities and constraining our realities. This book deals with social media issues such as the selfie cult, meme politics, internet addiction and the new default of narcissist behavior. Two decades after dotcom mania we should be able to answer the question of how second order social media operate—but we can't. So while the social media question may be omnipresent, if we want to stand up against [insert your pathology here] by design we first have to understand its inner workings and operations unraveled here through the vector of distraction and sadness. The mechanisms of sadness are followed by a second section focused more on theory and strategy, from the "platform" concept to the invisibility of technological violence. The third section deals with the selfie craze, its anonymous mask design counterpart and whether progressive memes are possible in the first place. The final section examines the corporate data extraction industries and surveillance systems that orient mass behavior into a new form of social

alienation. The concept of the commons runs counter to these logics, and I end by asking whether it offers a possible way out.

What happens when theory no longer presents itself as a grand design and is consumed as an afterthought? The internet is not a field in which public intellectuals play any role to speak of. Unlike previous eras, intellectual ambitions have to be modest. Before we design alternatives and formulate regulatory principles, it is vital to understand the psychology of social media platforms. *Sad by Design* combines radical internet critique with a confrontation of the all-too-real mental ups and downs of social media users. As Clifford Geertz observed, "understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity." For Geertz, "the study of culture penetrates into the very body of the object—that is, we begin with our own interpretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematize those."[11] This book embraces Geertz's challenge, analyzing aspects of today's online cultures that many users experience, from feelings of emptiness, numbness and indifference through to the contradictory attitudes toward the selfie and the regressive politics of memes.

We seem disenchanted with our de-facto online cultures. British think tank Nesta neatly summed up our current condition. "As the dark side of the internet is becoming increasingly clear, public demand for more accountable, democratic, more human alternatives is growing." Yet the researchers are also honest enough to see that challenging the existing dynamics won't be easy. We are at an impasse. "The internet finds itself dominated by two ruling narratives: the American one, where power is concentrated in the hands of just a few big players, and a Chinese model, where government surveillance appears to be the leitmotif. Between Big Tech and government control, where does this leave citizens?" To label social media users as citizens is obviously a political framing, common lingo within NGO "global civil society" circles. Is this our only option to escape the consumer identity? Nesta put two strategic questions on the table: "Could Europe build the kind of alternatives that would put citizens back in the driver's seat?" And, rather than trying to build the next Google, should Europe focus on building the decentralized infrastructures that would prevent the next Google emerging in the first place?

The current state of the social should hardly be surprising. Technical media have long been socially antagonistic, undermining and isolating rather than connecting. In *Futurability,* Franco Berardi marks the late

1970s as the dividing line, the moment when social consciousness and techno-revolution diverged. This is when we "entered the age of techno-barbarism: innovation provoked precarity, richness created mass misery, solidarity became competition, the connected brain was uncoupled from the social body and the potency of knowledge was uncoupled from social welfare."[12] As Bernard Stiegler stated, the speed of technical development has continued to accelerate, "dramatically widening the distance between technical systems and social organization as if, negotiation between them appearing to be impossible, their final divorce seem inevitable."[13] For The Invisible Committee, social media "work towards the real isolation of everybody. By immobilizing bodies. By keeping everyone cloistered in their signifying bubble. The power play of cybernetic power is to give everyone the impression that they have access to the whole world when they are actually more and more separated, that they have more and more 'friends' when they are more and more autistic."[14]

What's to be done with social media? The last few years have been dominated by a profound confusion. For some, non-use seems to be a non-starter. Evgeny Morozov, for example, tweets: "I don't want #Zuckerberg to resign. And we don't need to #deleteFacebook: it's as realistic as saying #deleteroads. What we need is a New Deal for #data. #Europe has to wake up!" And, while Siva Vaidhyanathan criticizes Facebook fiercely, he refuses to leave and delete his account. For others, non-use is precisely the answer. An early proposal could be Ulises Mejias' *Off the Network, Disrupting the Digital World* from 2013, a book that claimed to "unthink the network logic."[15] More recently, but along these same lines, the "right to disconnect" movement has been starting to taking shape.[16] Take the offline-only Disconnect magazine, an anthology of commentary, fiction, and poetry that can only be read if you disable your WiFi.[17] Along with (grudging) use or non-use, a third approach might be filed under misuse. In a *Guardian* article titled "How to Disappear from the Internet", Simon Parkin provided (online) readers with a manual on how to become a digital ghost. "Deleting stuff is just useless" he asserted. His advice instead? Create fake accounts and misdirect searches. His conclusion, which makes his headline misleading at best, is that it is almost impossible to disappear. Options are limited to reputation management, either painstakingly conducted by ourselves— or for those with the money, carried out by specialized companies.

What if it's too late to leave Google, Twitter, Instagram or WhatsApp, no matter how digitally detoxed we become in other spheres of life? Let's face it, in the eyes of Silicon Valley, the offline, off-the-grid Burning Man experience once a year and the countless daily online Facebook visits are not opposites—they are complementary arrangements. Ergo, we are both offline and online.[18] Critique finds itself in a similar, contradictory position. The world has caught up with his arguments, Andrew Keen admits in his 2018 book *How to Fix the Future, Staying Human in the Digital Age*. Keen asks how we can reassert our agency over technology. We're not backseat drivers after all. As opposed to the protection of privacy, a demand that many consider Euro-centric and bourgeois, Keen instead demands data integrity. The fiddling with data has to stop. "Surveillance ultimately isn't a good business model. And if there's one thing that history teaches us, it's that bad business models eventually die."[19] He lists John Borthwick's "five bullets to fix the future: open technology platforms, anti-trust regulation, responsible human centric design, the preservation of public space and a new social security system."[20]

Yet the agency needed to implement these fixes seems hamstrung. Internet critics have limited power. Unable to network or to escape "old media", they have been pigeon holed into the role of the individual expert or commentator, excluded from any wider public dialogue about what's to be done. Academics too seem somewhat impotent. Driven by a logic of peer review and ranking, they publish inside the sealed universe of the journal with its limited access and even more limited impact. So while researchers certainly collect valuable evidence about the economic might of social media platforms, tech criticism at large remains scattered—incapable of institutionalizing its own practice and creating more cohesive schools of thought.

Recently we're witnessing the rise of peak data. Like peak oil, this is the theoretical point when the maximum rate of data extraction has been attained. From a user perspective, data are not consciously produced from intentional labor. Data collection becomes ubiquitous, an ever present procedure triggered by any movement, any act, any click or swipe. From a corporate perspective, data storage seems limitless; capacity is no longer a scarce resource. So although most (AI) pundits will tell you otherwise, the big data hype has reached its peak. Gartner, for example, had already dropped big data out of its hype cycle back in 2015. Peak data is the moment when the internet giants already know everything about you, the moment when additional details begin to tip the balance

and cause their data regime to (slowly but inexorably) implode. This is the turning point. After this moment—and against the evangelists of eternal growth—each piece of data has the potential to make the entire collection less valuable, not more. After this moment, the value of extra data diminishes to a zero point, running the risk of polluting profiles in such a way that they disintegrate.

The data phantom of the self begins to crumble. The system produces such amounts of data that either everyone will become a suspect—or no one. Vital details will no longer be spotted. The production of information, once defined as the production of meaningful differences, is such that it flips and turns to zero: system overload. The goldmine of data suddenly becomes digital garbage. Companies like Google are aware of the dangers of such Hegelian turns and set out to rescue its valuable data assets.[21] It's worth remarking that such a policy shift does not come from any popular uprising against social depletion due to the takeover of intelligent machines. No, this is a strictly internal initiative aimed at self-preservation. In the new version of Android none of the tracking functionalities have been removed. Google simply collects less data—for its own well-being.

Platforms scramble to counter peak data by announcing new measures. For the first time, Google's Android operating system will be premised on restraint and reduction: "Instead of showing you all the ways you can use its phone operating system to do more, it's creating features to help you use it *less*."[22] The proposed dashboard will tell you "how often, when, and for how long you are using every app on your phone. It will also allow you to set limits on yourself." Think here of applying quantified-self dashboards like Fitbit to your phone's social media apps, making it easy to turn off notifications. "When bedtime arrives, your phone will automatically go into Do Not Disturb mode."

Other products follow suit. Google Search, for its part, responds to peak data with a new plan to show you "more useful ads". In a similar shift, the new update for Google's YouTube app includes a setting where the app reminds users to "take a break" from watching videos.[23] And in parallel to these moves, Google has launched a "wellbeing" campaign. The slogan? "Great technology should improve life, not distract from it."[24] Which values are emphasized when we progress toward a higher stage of development? Improved multi-tasking? This recent shift to self-limit is strange indeed. Will Google ultimately slow down real-time exchanges in order to build in reflection? What if improvement can only

be achieved by speaking up against the dominant (and deadly) culture? Why should time-well-spent technology help you switch off?[25]

Such responses to peak data are pre-emptive, striving to prevent disaster. With the danger of entropy looming from the (near) future, data collection is no longer an end in itself. For tech titans, the critical next step could be to press value out of the collected data whilst not upsetting users. This profile rescue plan is sold to the user as a contribution to their digital well-being, a gesture of "corporate responsibility". We could call this "backlash by design". Google has already anticipated any possible discontent. In a "precrime" *Minority Report* gesture, this response skips the resistance phase and installs the Hegelian synthesis preliminarily. We've overcome the culture of appropriation.

Silicon Valley already knows that we want to wind down. How will users respond to the default moralism of such changes? Against such do-gooder gestures, we should consider collectively implementing "data prevention" principles ourselves.

In the face of these conditions, we need internet studies more than ever. And yet somehow it has failed to be recognized and supported as a serious discipline. To modify Habermas, we can speak of the "unfinished project" of digitization as the latest stage of modernization, one that the post-1968 *Bildungselite* categorically blended out, convinced that the engineering buzz that produced internet tools would not affect them. Whereas we can still study film, theatre and literature, this is not the case with the internet, which has consistently failed to establish itself as a distinct academic discipline with its own full-time BA, MA and PhD programs. To defend this gap, institutions trot out the same line that "it's still early days"—as if not enough people are yet using the internet. Where is our "conflict of the faculties"? Worldwide, no one seems to be willing to take charge, to make that first (shaky but significant) step. Artistic new media programs have silently been closed down, have been merged into harmless, inward-looking academic enterprises such as "digital humanities", or have been subsumed into the broadcast logic of media and communications. As a result, the white male geeks from engineering and would-be venture capitalists from business schools have achieved cultural dominance—endlessly replicating Silicon Valley schemas and leaving those with a social science, arts and humanities or design background on the sidelines.

Italian Arabist and fellow activist Donatella della Ratta, who teaches digital culture at John Cabot University in Rome, adds another element:

> The online subject is so deeply involved, that she can no longer see the phone, nor the internet. The young generation is not concerned with the technological device itself, they have simply erased it, forgotten it. My students are bored if I talk about technology per se. They want to talk about feelings, about their bodies and emotions… they simply don't see technology anymore.

What are the consequences of this rapidly spreading tech fatigue, right at a moment when controversies have finally reached the traditional political arena?

As sociality becomes exhausted, decisions about commitment and connection become confused. "One has to know what to commit to and then commit to it. Even if it means making enemies. Or making friends. Once we know what we want, we're no longer alone, the world repopulates. Everywhere there are allies, closenesses, and an infinite gradation of possible friendships."[26] Contrast this ambitious, decisionist dream of The Invisible Committee with Mark Fisher's observation about the lack of self-motivation amongst students and a lack of sanctions if they're absent or do not perform well. "They typically respond to this freedom not by pursuing projects but by falling into hedonic (or anhedonic) lassitude: the soft narcosis, the comfort food oblivion of PlayStation, all-night TV and marijuana." Confronted with permanent information overload, millennials are said to be "overconfident", politely refusing to "learn more" and instead becoming attracted to "things that are more important". The concept of a social interior is no longer a paradox.

So before we rush headlong into debates about alternatives and strategies, *Sad by Design* feels the need to explore this rather vague, undefined realm of decision fatigue and ego depletion. This time there will be no travelogues, no lavish reports about Institute of Network Cultures initiatives such as Unlike Us, Video Vortex and MoneyLab. The market demands that I focus and present online despair in its most attractive form. In earlier essays I've written on nihilist blogging and the psycho-pathology of information overload. This book picks up those threads, examining in particular the interplay between our mental state and the technological condition. Here I investigate social reality from mental perspectives such as distraction and sadness. The book title can be read as a triangulation of addiction by design, the famous study on Las Vegas slot machines by Natasha Dow Schüll, the distraction by design of James Williams and the privacy by design of Ann Cavoukian.

Last but not least, let's look into the word "design" from this book's title. Is another design possible?[27] It is one thing to deconstruct the paint-by-numbers innovation of management-led design thinking. What role can design (and aesthetics in general) still play to overcome the current stagnation? One possible road here is to critically assess real existing design cultures, before we rush into the promotion of one radical design concept over another.

We can't just have a life. We are condemned to design it. Benetton's colorful '90s photography of global misery has become a daily reality. Slums are flooded by designer clothes and footwear. Versace refugees are no longer rarities. Envy and competition have turned us into subjects of an aesthetic conspiracy that is impossible to escape. The McLuhanesque programmatic, "help beautify junk yards", is now a global reality. Gone are the days when Bauhaus design was supposed to empower the everyday reality of the working class. We're well past the point of design as an extra layer, an enhancement aiming to subtly assist eye and hand. Design is no longer a pedagogic discipline that intends to uplift the taste of the normies in order to give their daily lives sense and purpose. We're going for the lifestyle of the rich and famous. The ordinary is no longer enough; the mantra is onwards and upwards. We, the 99%, claim the exclusive lifestyle of the 1%. This is the aspiration of planet H&M.

Much like pre-torn and bleached denim, all our desired commodities have already been used, touched, altered, mixed, liked and shared before we purchase them. We're pre-consumed. With the radical distribution of funky lifestyles comes the loss of semiology. There is no control anymore of meaning. Brands can mean anything for anyone. This is precarity of the sign.

Our beautified mess is no longer an accident or a tragic sign of a never-ending decay, but rather an integral part of the overall layout. Today's design culture is an expression of our intensely prototypical lives. We are the experience junkies who desire to wring out life's pleasures, to thoroughly exhaust it. And yet it's remarkable how little transformative progress we have made. We want so much, and make so little. Our precarious state has become perpetual.

When we confront ourselves with sci-fi precarity—that strange techno-reality ahead of us—the first association that comes to mind is the conformist 1950s. Sure, we wished we lived in a *Blade Runner* movie, but our reality more closely resembles a Victor Hugo novel or a Douglas Sirk film in which the hyper-real takes command. Boredom, anxiety

and despair are the unfortunate default. That's "real existing precarity", comparable to "real existing socialism" in the outgoing Cold War period. Casual precarity, everywhere you look. The terror of comfort drives us mad. The flatness of it all is contrasted and accelerated by the occasional modernist IKEA style that, in theory, should cheer us up, but in the end only provokes an inner revolt against this manufactured reality. What's to be done with workers that have nothing to lose but their Ray-Ban sunglasses? We can't wait for Godot, not even for a split second. No matter how desperate the situation, the uprising simply won't happen. At best we attend a festival, expand our mind and body—and then sink back into the void.

Once the silence has faded away, we step out of our arty-geeky-academic echo chambers. The current political situation demands we refrain from techno-solutionist proposals and instead migrate these supposedly narrow internet issues into larger contexts such as precarity, post-colonial tech politics, gender issues, climate change action or alternative urbanism. Despite all the potential for fatalism and introspection, let's stick to Mark Fisher's slogan: "pessimism of the emotions, optimism of the act."[28] As a gesture to this moment, my investigation into critical internet cultures concludes with a contribution to the commons debate. As Noam Chomsky said:

There is a great deal that we can do to bend the arc of history towards justice, to borrow the phrase that Martin Luther King made famous. The easy way is to succumb to despair, and help ensure that the worst will happen. The sensible and courageous way is to join those who are working for a better world, using the ample opportunities available.[29]