

Article

## Social Media and Experiential Ambivalence

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**Abstract:** At once fearful and dependent, hopeful and distrustful, our contemporary relationship with technology is highly ambivalent. Using experiential accounts from an ongoing Facebook-based qualitative study (N = 231), I both diagnose and articulate this ambivalence. I argue that technological ambivalence is rooted primarily in the deeply embedded moral prescription to lead a meaningful life, and a related uncertainty about the role of new technologies in the accomplishment of this task. On the one hand, technology offers the potential to *augment* or even *enhance* personal and public life. On the other hand, technology looms with the potential to *supplant* or *replace* real experience. I examine these polemic potentialities in the context of personal experiences, interpersonal relationships, and political activism. I conclude by arguing that the pervasive integration and non-optionality of technical systems amplifies utopian hopes, dystopian fears, and ambivalent concerns in the contemporary era.

**Keywords:** digital social technology; self; identity; ambivalence; social media; Facebook; social network sites; utopia; dystopia; qualitative methods; morality

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### 1. Introduction

Debates abound over the “positive” versus “negative” effects of new technologies. These debates tend to take two main tracks: utopic hopes or dystopic fears. In the present work, I approach the debate from an experiential perspective, looking at the stories that people tell about themselves and their relationships with technologies. Specifically, using data from an ongoing Facebook-based qualitative study (N = 231), I look at participants’ subjective experiences with social media.

By social media, I refer to the set of interactive internet applications that facilitate (collaborative or individual) creation, curation, and sharing of user-generated content [1]. I explicitly include in this

definition the hardware, software, and infrastructures on and through which these platforms operate. For example, checking or updating Facebook involves not only the site itself, but also a device with which to access the site (e.g., smart phone, laptop, desktop), software that supports the site (e.g., Safari web browser), and connection to the internet (e.g., a mobile hot spot).

I show here that participants' experiential relationships with social media are neither utopic nor dystopic, but largely ambivalent. I work to both diagnose and illustrate this sense of ambivalence. The following section provides a brief survey of the varied prognoses of human-technology relations—describing technological ambivalence through juxtaposition to what it is not.

## 2. Technological Ambivalence

I begin here with a discussion of what technological ambivalence is *not*. Specifically, technological ambivalence is not utopic or dystopic. It is neither the unfettered fear nor the reverence of technology. The main problem with both utopic and dystopic arguments is their failure to account for nuance and variation, and relatedly, their built-in determinism. And yet, as new technologies develop, they are inevitably met with these polemic and deterministic predictions and interpretations [2]. Importantly, both dystopic and utopic arguments rely heavily on the third-person perspective, with analysts approaching the subject matter from a removed position. As we will see in contrast, those who avoid such determinism often root their arguments in experiential accounts.

### 2.1. Utopic Arguments

Techno-utopists celebrate technology. From this perspective, technology represents progress and liberation. It is the means by which we enhance the human race, the world around us, our physical bodies, and our social and emotional lives.

Futurologist Ray Kurzweil, for example, argues that within the next fifteen to thirty years, nanobots will roam our bloodstreams, curing disease and fixing maladies. If one lives long enough, he argues, one can potentially live forever [3]. These predictive sentiments are echoed by the World Transhumanist Association (WTA)—a contingent that champions progress through converging technologies. Article 1 of the WTA *Transhumanist Declaration* states: “Humanity will be radically changed by technology in the future. We foresee the feasibility of redesigning the human condition, including such parameters as the inevitability of aging, limitations on human and artificial intellects, unchosen psychology, suffering, and our confinement to the planet earth [4].”

We will, according to this perspective, no longer be bound by bodily limitations.

Embracing this disembodiment hypothesis, early internet researchers largely heralded online spaces—especially MUDs and MOOs—as sites of identity play. This is epitomized by the early work of Sherry Turkle [5]. Though she worries over a disintegration of the self, she blissfully celebrates the potential to free oneself from the confines of gender, race, and physical ability. Those who follow this logic view “cyberspace” as a separate sphere, a place to “try on” new selves and improve role taking abilities—an equalizing space in which oppressed bodies are freed from their “Othering” characteristics (e.g., [6–9]).

Politically, utopists tout new technologies as vehicles of voice. In 1994, the Progress and Freedom Foundation (created by Newt Gingrich) published *Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna*

*Carta for the Knowledge Age* [10]. Here, the committee delineates the decentralizing and libertarian effects of electronic communication technologies, painting many-to-many communication capabilities as the building blocks of a true public sphere [11]. Similarly, Nicholas Negroponte, a journalist for *Wired* magazine, argues that digitization is necessarily equalizing, as it works to “flatten organization, globalize society, decentralize control, and help harmonize people” [12]. This is echoed by George Gilder [13], who contends that new technologies, coupled with a free market economy, level the economic playing field and enable anyone with the talents, drives, and motivations to viably compete in the business sector.

Although much of the utopic rhetoric died out in the academic literature after the 1990s, Facebook Founder Mark Zuckerberg maintains this celebratory perspective in the public technological discourse. He touts digital social networking as the key to a free and open world, a global community, and a connected population. In his 2012 *Letter to Investors* [14], Zuckerberg summarizes his philosophy with the opening statement:

“Our mission is to make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with their friends and family, to discover what is going on in the world around them, and to share and express what matters to them to the people they care about” (2).

In line with this mission, Zuckerberg and Facebook Inc. design the site with opt-in privacy settings, Terms of Service (ToS) that require (most) users to identify themselves by their given names, and mobile applications that encourage users to update (and be updated) in real time. Ironically, it is this kind of pervasive connectivity that many dystopists take as their point of contention.

## 2.2. Dystopic Arguments

Dystopists view new technologies as largely dehumanizing. These technologies are to be feared and avoided, or at best, used with caution. Technological advancement, from this perspective, is the means by which we destroy the planet, disintegrate the social, and lose ourselves.

Foucault [15] (p. 159), writing about prison architectures, describes the ways in which surveillance technologies of the powerful lead effectively to the deepest form of social control for those under watch (*i.e.*, self control). Researchers have widely applied Foucault’s theory of surveillance to paint dystopic accounts of a digitally connected world. For instance, Mitchell [16] argues that: “Since electronic data collection and digital collation techniques are so much more powerful than any that could be deployed in the past, they provide the means to create the ultimate Foucauldian dystopia.”

Similarly, Lessig [17] (pp. 5–6) contends that “...cyberspace, left to itself...will become a perfect tool of control”. Outside of the academy, this notion of technology-as mechanism-of-oppressive-social-control proliferates in near-future fiction, most famously through Orwell’s omnipresent Big Brother [18], and most recently in Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* arenas—equipped with hidden cameras and micro-chipped contestants [19].

Not only do new technologies threaten freedom, the dystopists argue, but threaten community and interpersonal connection. This is evidenced in book titles such as *Bowling Alone* [20], *The Lonely Crowd* [21], and *Alone Together* [22], in which the authors describe an increasingly disconnected public, isolated from each other not only in spite, but largely *because* of electronic and digital

technologies. Sherry Turkle further expresses these sentiments in a 2012 *New York Times* editorial [23]. She states:

“I’ve learned that the little devices most of us carry around are so powerful that they change not only what we do, but also who we are. We’ve become accustomed to a new way of being ‘alone together.’... Technology-enabled, we are able to be with one another, and also elsewhere, connected to wherever we want to be. Human relationships are rich; they’re messy and demanding. We have learned the habit of cleaning them up with technology. And the move from conversation to connection is part of this. But it’s a process in which we shortchange ourselves. Worse, it seems that over time we stop caring, we forget that there is a difference.”

Similarly, Stephen Marche, writing in the *The Atlantic* [24], argues:

“We are living in an isolation that would have been unimaginable to our ancestors, and yet we have never been more accessible...In a world consumed by ever more novel modes of socializing, we have less and less actual society. We live in an accelerating contradiction: the more connected we become, the lonelier we are. We were promised a global village; instead we inhabit the drab cul-de-sacs and endless freeways of a vast suburb of information.”

We can see a tangible manifestation of dystopic anxieties surrounding social media through the medicalization of perceived technological over-use. Discussing digitization rhetoric in China, Golub and Lingley [25] (p. 64) describe a moral panic in which internet use is metaphorically linked to opium. They note that “the real threat is not concerned merely with the bodies and minds of those addicted but also their family and society’s moral order”. This is reflected in the proliferation of diagnostic criteria and treatment centers for “internet addiction.” Indeed, at the time of this writing, a Google search for “Internet Addiction Treatment Centers” provides 1,620,000 results.

### 2.3. Ambivalent Accounts

We can understand technological ambivalence as precisely the tension between utopia and dystopia. It is the simultaneous presence of utopic hopes and dystopic fears; co-existing in a strained relationship; rooted in the politics, propensities, and potentials of technology.

Within science and technology studies (STS), it is common to understand technological artifacts themselves as ambivalent, containing both the proverbial finger prints of their human creators [26], and the imagined and unimaginable effects upon human users, cultures, and social structures (see [27]). The complexity of technological artifacts—and their indeterminable effects—is well articulated by Actor-Network theorist Bruno Latour [28] (p. 251):

“The very complexity of the apparatuses, which is due to the accumulation of folds and detours, layers and reversals, compilations and re-orderings, forever denies the clarity of right reason, under the aegis of which technologies have been first introduced.”

Expanding on this, Schraube [27] conceptualizes technology as *materialized action*. Technology is neither static nor deterministically powerful. Rather, technology is imbued with particular intentions, used in a multitude of ways, and an impetus for unpredictable personal practices and cultural trends.

Providing a useful language with which to talk about this indeterminacy, Massumi [29] draws on philosopher Henri Bergson to juxtapose *potentiality* to *possibility*. Using the example of an arrow shot from a bow, Massumi describes the arrow’s *potential* as the infinite paths and endpoints at the time of

release, and its *possibility* as the measurable paths and endpoints calculated after the arrow lands. The latter has a final outcome, with determinable alternatives. For the former, the outcome remains uncertain, as do the available routes. With this analogy, utopic and dystopic arguments can be thought of as end-points, as outcomes from which we can trace all possible paths. In contrast, ambivalence is a flying arrow, operating on a trajectory of uncharted (and unchartable) potentialities.

This kind of ambivalence recognizes simultaneously the independent power of technology, and the role of human agency. The next step is to understand how the ambivalence *of* technology affects experiential ambivalence *with* technology. The recent works of education scholar Fengshu Liu [30] and bioethicist Carl Elliott [31] offer strong examples of this line of research. Indeed, these researchers examine human-technology relations empirically, through experiential subjectivity, and in doing so, find excitement and fear, benefit and loss, guilt and justification, and above all, uncertainty.

Liu [30] (p.17) describes ambivalence among Chinese youth in reference to internet cafes. Liu's participants frame the internet cafe as at once a stress-relieving outlet for a generation who must operate within the pressures of the one-child policy, and an addictive threat to a productive—and moral—life. To make sense of their experiences, participants articulate ambivalence by drawing skillfully and simultaneously on polemic metaphors of self-control and deserved enjoyment. Liu concludes:

“The internet is not merely a technological object, but it serves as part of a web of values, relationships, symbols and routines that make up social life. As such, it is unavoidably loaded with competing meanings, which are reflected by the different, and sometimes conflicting, notions about what constitutes ‘proper’ use.”

Elliott [31] (p. 297) shows similar experiential ambivalence with regards to medical enhancement technologies. He poignantly summarizes scores of experiential accounts in the following passage:

“Enthusiasm is probably the wrong word to describe the way Americans feel about enhancement technologies. If this is enthusiasm, it is the enthusiasm of a diver on the high platform, who has to talk himself into taking the plunge...I don't think Americans expect happiness in a handful of tablets. We take the tablets, but we brood about it. We try to hide the tablets from our friends. We worry that taking them is a sign of weakness. We try to convince our friends to take them too. We fret that if we don't take them, others will outshine us. We take the tablets, but they leave a bitter taste in our mouths...in those tablets is a mix of all the American wishes, lusts, and fears: the drive to self-improvement, the search for fulfillment...yet a mix diluted by nagging anxieties about social conformity, about getting too much too easily, about phoniness and self-deception and shallow pleasure.”

Like Liu, Elliott's notion of technological ambivalence is rooted not only in an uncertainty about the effects of the technology, but also in the relationship between the technological object and living a “good” or “moral” life.

This emphasis on morality, coupled with the indeterminable potentialities of technological objects, is the key to *diagnosing* technological ambivalence in general, and social media technological ambivalence specifically. Moral tenets are highly complex, and often, contradictory—increasingly so in a “postmodern” era of relativist values [32,33]. We know we are supposed to live a “good life,” but we must operate with an unclear picture of what this looks like [31]. Are we to be independent or cooperative? Are we to be driven by professional success or interpersonal relationships? Are we to be introspective or culturally adaptive? In the contemporary era of constant connection, this general moral ambiguity combines dynamically with an uncertainty about the role of technologies in the

accomplishment of the inchoate moral imperative, creating an uncomfortable relationship between humans and the technologies that pervade everyday life.

### 3. Methods

Data for the present work come from an ongoing Facebook-based qualitative study of social media (beginning in March 2011 and continuing into the present). I refer to the study as “Facebook-based” because social media are, by nature, highly interconnected. As such, although I use Facebook as a base for the sample, and utilize the Facebook space as a starting point, the study necessarily examines numerous interconnected digital and physical realms. Indeed, Facebook acts as a “hub” of social media, connecting to and from outside sites, documenting and planning face-to-face interactions, and even automatically tracking non-Facebook related activities (e.g., NIKE + RUNNING is an application that records the distance, speed, and number of calories a person burns during a walk or run and shares it with the person’s Facebook network).

The sample (N = 231) is derived originally from my personal Facebook network, and snowballed out into my indirect and in-indirect (and in-in-indirect *etc.*) networks. I began by creating a separate “researcher” page, inviting those in my personal network to “Friend” request the page. From the researcher page, I regularly ask participants to distribute the call for participation among their own often changing networks, and for their networks to distribute the call further.

After the first three rounds of recruitment, I left my personal network entirely, moving recruitment solely to the researcher page. In this way, I worked to decentralize my direct connections and broaden the sampling frame. At the time of this writing, the vast majority of participants reside outside of my direct network. That is, they were recruited by existing participants, and have no direct connection with me outside of the study.

To begin with a familiar sample certainly affects the depth, type, and interpretation of information that I receive, as well the makeup of the sample itself. Indeed, the prevalence of network homophily [34] means that participants, snowballing out from a single network, will likely share several social characteristics. We see this effect most strongly in the disproportionately high education levels of participants in the present study (see demographics below). With that said, participants express a variety of political views and social practices. Moreover, each iteration of the snowball sample removes new participants from existing ones, potentially increasing diversity. Finally, I can (and do) make it a point to conduct interviews with participants from diverse social positions, again working to counter the effects of homophily.

Despite the limitations, this sampling technique has both practical and theoretical benefits. At the practical level of access, I have an active group of Facebook users with whom I have already established a degree of rapport, and who are well connected to other active users/potential participants. Theoretically, the use of a familiar sample places me within a symmetrical position within the setting [35]. People typically use social media (and social network sites in particular) to interact with existing networks [36–38]. These networks expand snowball style, much in the same way that I accumulate Friends for my researcher page. To experience the field site as it is experienced by its inhabitants facilitates a rich analysis, as I interpret data in a way that embeds me within the structure and culture of the site. Moreover, the use of a familiar sample has a strong tradition within qualitative

computer-mediated-communication (CMC) research, dating back to Rheingold's canonical study of the *Virtual Community* [39] and remaining prevalent to date (e.g., [9,40–42]).

For the purpose of anonymity, all participants are referred to by pseudonyms and I reveal no individual identifying information. Overall, the sample is made up of 26% self-identified male, and 74% self-identified female users. Racially, 70% of participants are White, 16% Latino/Hispanic, 5% Black, 2% Asian, and 3% of mixed race. Participants' ages range from 18 to 65, with a mean of just under 30 years old. Participants' number of Friends ranges from 2 to 1400, with a mean of 425. About 80% of participants have at least a college degree, while 15% have some college, and 5% have no college at all. To contextualize this, a study by the Pew Internet and American Life project shows Facebook users to be 56% female, 78% White, have an average age of 38 years old, and an average of 229 Friends. About 35% of users hold at least a college degree and about 30% have no higher than a high school degree [43]. Although participants in the present study primarily reside in the U.S., the sample includes participants living in/originally from Mexico, Canada, China, Korea, Thailand, and various locations in Europe.

I base my analysis in the present work on online and offline interviews. Interviews initially take place over instant messenger (IM) (either through the Facebook message service or Google chat depending on the preference of the participant), and when possible, are followed up with face-to-face (FtF) meetings. Thus far, I have conducted 32 online interviews and 17 in-person interviews, for a total of 49 in depth interview. Both online and FtF interviews take between two and four hours. Online interviews are all individual, while FtF interviews take place both individually and in groups.

I coded each interview line by line, directly following the interaction. In this way, I created preliminary sensitizing categories [44]. Once all interviews were complete, I read through them again as a full set. This allowed me to create, refine, and collapse categories with the emergence of new themes and nuanced trends [45]. I read through the full set of texts several times until all content fit into at least one category, and no further categories could be created. Examples used in the present analysis represent well articulated versions of recurring themes. Indeed, many of these examples could easily be replaced with several other equivalent quotations. Importantly, interviews evolve over time as new trends emerge. Data for the present work come explicitly from one such evolution. In all interviews, I conclude by asking "How do you think social media affects you personally, and how do you think it affects social life in general?" Early on, I noticed a strong sense of ambivalence in these responses, with a broad sense of uncertainty about the potential for social media to *augment* or even *enhance* personal and public life, versus the potential of social media to *supplant* or *replace* experiences of personal and public life. This most often manifested in discussions of interpersonal relationships, personal experiences, and political participation. As such, in later interviews, I asked participants specifically about the role of social media within each of these arenas. Responses to these questions are the basis for the present analysis. I show the wording of these questions within the analysis section.

I supplement interviews with participant observation and content analysis. Rather than analyzing each participant's profile individually, I instead conduct interpretive content analysis from the Facebook News Feed on the researcher page, populated by the 231 participants [46]. This is a summary stream of participants' activities (e.g., status updates, picture postings, public wall posts, Friend connections, relationship status changes, songs listened to on *Spotify* etc.) I spend about thirty

minutes browsing the News Feed each morning (before 10:00 a.m.) and each evening (after 5:30 p.m.) to capture the content that participants produce throughout the course of the day. I delineate, code, and categorize content as themes emerge. Following Glaser [47], I analyze and code simultaneously, pulling out illustrative materials as they apply to existing codes, and creating new categories through emergent trends. This technique offers a more dynamic and realistic view of Facebook interaction than one-shot analyses of user profiles. Moreover, user profiles are constantly in flux, with changes reflected through the News Feed ticker. Although I do not use this data source directly in the present analysis, it is unmistakably interwoven into the production and interpretation of interviews.

#### 4. Analysis

In contemplating a diagnosis of experiential technological ambivalence, I pointed to the uncertainty surrounding the role of technology in accomplishing an ambiguously defined “good” life. In contrast to deterministic poles of utopia and dystopia, we can think of social media as existing uncomfortably between *polemic potentialities*—or within the indeterminable space between utopia and dystopia. From the present data, I identify two broad poles of social media potentiality—enhancement at one end, and replacement at the other. We look now at how technological ambivalence manifests experientially in personal experiences, interpersonal relationships, and political participation.

##### 4.1. Personal Experiences

By personal experiences I mean how, as thinking and emotive beings, we experience our lives, and how social media affects this. Indeed, the moral actor works to remain engaged, appreciative of the moment, and tuned in to those with whom s/he shares it. The potentialities of social media both facilitate and threaten this engagement.

On the one hand, social media can enhance our experiences by allowing us to document and share solitary moments. In turn, we can include ourselves in the moments shared by others. Such sharing, of course, takes place regardless of physical co-presence. As Rainie and Wellman [48] point out, with the prevalence of social media and mobile technologies, no one ever has to be truly alone.

On the other hand, social media threatens to shift our focus away from the experience entirely, replacing it with a focus on representation. Here, we both create and follow an influx of data (e.g., photographs of a special meal, reports about an interesting book, views from the tops of mountains and high-rise buildings). The perceived need to follow this influx, and the technological ability to do so, is often referred to as *Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)* (e.g., [49]).

To get at the tension between these polemic potentialities, I ask participants: “How does social media (and the prevalence of mobile devices) affect personal experiences? (e.g., a quiet night at home, beautiful sunset, romantic dinner, *etc.*)” Expressing tension, one participant says:

“I feel that this can go two ways. I feel closer to my friends when they bring these personal moments up the second they happen via smart phone, *etc.*, but I always feel really awkward about it, like when a friend gets engaged and posts it that very second... or, even more awkwardly, I went to a wedding last year in which, right before the kiss, the bride and groom updated their relationship status from ‘engaged’ to ‘married’ as part of the ceremony. It created this weird lull in the ceremony while they were both fiddling with their phone. They weren't engaged with the guests or even with each

other—they were engaged with their phone. So while this ceremony was all about them as a couple, there was this moment after they were declared husband and wife, where they turned/looked away from each other and at their phones. Maybe it was only a symbolic awkwardness, but it felt strange to me.” (E, technical writer, online interview).

In a small group (2 person) FtF interview, J (graduate student) and H (graduate student) reflect both physical and verbal ambivalence in response to the above prompt:

**J:** Well I mean, I like to take pictures of what I’m doing. Like I’m out and having a good time, and I post a picture and then people like it and comment on it and make jokes, and I mean, that makes the experience more fun... especially if I’m looking good (giggles) but...it can...ya know...go too far, like sometimes it’s hard to just be in the moment.

**H:** Yeah, I mean, I hear what she’s saying, I like to take pictures too, but...(long pause) it’s like sometimes I’m just like okay put the fucking phone down and hang out!! Seriously.

(**J** and **H** look at each other and laugh).

**H:** You just have to like, know your limits. Like you don’t want to be invisible and not post anything, and you also do want to see what other people are doing, but then it’s like sometimes just do what you’re doing, forget about the picture. Seriously, it can be like freakin overload. I had to turn the [Facebook] notifications off on my phone, because it’s like, I would be there, reading and it’s like “bing” someone posted on your wall; “bing” someone commented on your photo.

**J:** Yeah, I mean it’s hard though to find that balance (looks at H and takes a long sip of her drink) I like to post and to see the funny and cool things other people post, I want to keep up, but like, at what point is it too much?

We see here both the pleasure of documentation, and the anxiety surrounding FOMO. We further see a flip side to FOMO: *Fear of Being Missed (FOBM)*. Here, we see how anxiety surrounds not only the ability to keep up with others’ on-goings, but the anxiety to simply keep up. As participants compare their own lives to the heavily documented lives of others, they at times feel impelled to share their own experiences—even the most solitary ones. Participants therefore struggle to “find a balance” between keeping abreast and staying visible, without losing themselves to a “virtual” world.

The focus on documentation as an enriching yet potentially costly part of experience is not necessarily new, as picture albums and commemorative t-shirts have long been an important part of significant events. Social media, however, with an architecture that enables instantaneous sharing, and a normative structure that expects it, strengthens both the ability and the urge to document. In turn, participants experience ambivalence about practices of documentation and its implications for the sacred personal experiences of everyday life.

#### 4.2. Interpersonal Relationships

By interpersonal relationships, I mean how we relate to and with one another. Interpersonal relationships act as our moral ties to the social world. Indeed, it is our social ties that constitute our very humanness. As mediating devices, social media can connect and separate; conjoin and isolate.

On the one hand, utopic hopefuls promote social media’s potential to enhance interpersonal relationships by allowing people to maintain friendships with geographically distant others, and

supplement relationships with those they see on a regular basis. This effect is touted by Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who paints Facebook as a means by which connections are made, maintained, and strengthened through digitally based social networking [14]. On the other hand, however, dystopic discourses warn us of social media's potential to spread us too thin, make connection too easy, and undermine our ability to engage in deep and meaningful relationships at all. Indeed, Turkle [22,23] describes in detail this kind of downward spiral of anti-sociality, in which digital distraction negates physical co-presence.

I ask participants about this dimension as follows: "How does social media (and the prevalence of mobile devices) affect interpersonal relationships?" One participant replies:

"In regards to previously established relationships, I think social media can have both a constructive and a destructive effect. It can be constructive in that it allows for people who live far away to stay close. For example, my best friend lives 3 hours away, but it's through social media...that we can stay closer because it...aids in the easiness of being able to talk. It can also be destructive because you can form reliance on it which can take away from the need to have a general conversation. You might want to catch up with someone, but there is no need because you 'follow each other on Facebook,' and therefore lose the ability to communicate with one another (C, office worker, online interview)."

Similarly, in a small group (two person) FtF interview, participants C (quoted above) and K (college student) navigate together the potentialities of social media within interpersonal relationships.

**K:** Well, I'll tell you that it (the prevalence of social media) has a negative effect on social skills.

**C:** Oh yeah, my little sister doesn't know how to talk, and really, it IS easier to send an email than be forced to talk to someone, so even I'm losing social skills.

**K:** Yeah, and like, my roommate, ohmigosh, we got in a fight and she is sitting there in the other room texting. I'm like COME ON...

**C:** Oh yeah I hate that (rolls eyes). My roommates do that to. We end up in these group text chats...and like, they CAN'T have a conversation it's so ridiculous.

**K:** But then, at the same time, it sometimes helps people keep in touch. Like usually I don't like skype but I have a friend who is really into it, so we talk on skype all the time, and like, I can see her face, and hear her voice, and that's different, that's like real communication that we couldn't do otherwise because she lives so far away.

**C:** (nodding) Yeah, it's the same with my family. I'm an out of state kid, so I have to be on Facebook and skype to keep up with everyone...

**Both:** (Stare at each other, laugh, and stare at me).

**K:** So I mean, I guess we didn't give you any real answer (both laugh).

**C:** (rolls eyes) I don't know (throws hands in air) I want to say good or bad, but I don't know. Next question please!! (Both laugh).

Interestingly, C owns a sense of ambivalence in the online interview, but requires time, labor, collaboration, and negotiation to arrive at ambivalence in the FtF setting. Methodologically, this speaks to the different kinds of data derived through different communication channels, as written interaction gives participants time to think and work through their thoughts, whereas FtF requires more immediacy. Further, the FtF setting again reveals a tangible discomfort with ambivalence, as C and K start at one pole (negative perceptions), concede that the situation is more complex (acknowledging the

interpersonal benefits of social media) and end in the uncomfortable space of ambiguity—asking that we move on to more solid ground, as C requests the “next question please!!”

### 4.3. Political Participation

As long as they have been writing about “The Internet,” social scientists have discussed and debated its potential as a “public sphere” (see Papacharissi [50] for a review). Democratic participation is not only an established American “right” but indeed, a perceived moral “duty” [11]. Social media simultaneously gives voice and bring voices together, while blurring these voices and facilitating their transience.

Some argue that internet technologies offer a platform for grass roots movements, cultural sharing, and the presence of multiple voices (e.g., [51]). Others understand digital technologies as new means of surveillance, social control, and the reification (rather than de-construction) of existing power hierarchies—or at best, a space in which multiple voices blur into an oversaturated din (e.g.,[52]). This debate is particularly sharp in light of the prevalent (though certainly not exclusive) use of social media in international social movements and political uprisings, such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Julian Assange’s WikiLeaks. Indeed, the role of social media in political participation is so salient that new (often value-laden) language has emerged with which to talk about the phenomena (e.g., hacktivism, slacktivism, Twitter revolution).

Participants, largely, find themselves experientially caught between the polemics of the debate. After numerous participants brought up politics during their interviews, I began to ask: “What role do social media play in political participation?” Participants demonstrate how on the one hand, social media can supplement or enhance political participation by providing a platform through which to share views and to learn from others, as well as a means to organize and document injustice (e.g., engage in “sousveillance”[53]). On the other hand, however, the ease with which users can deploy social media for political purposes (e.g., signing and sharing petitions) threatens to conflate activism with empty identity work, undermining democratic conversation and replacing it with narcissistic “slacktivism.”

N (teacher), for example, flounders through these polemic potentialities in a very long (shortened here) monologue about her experience with social media and political participation.

“I think—well, I was about to say it’s been positive, but there are some negatives....It’s a lot harder to lie. A candidate will say ‘I never said X!’ and then within minutes someone can produce the speech where the candidate did say X... There are lots of online petitions that spread awareness and can make a difference...It’s easier to find different points of view, even if you live in a small town, you can get more diverse views...and obviously, the Arab Spring and Occupy Movement showed how valuable Twitter can be... But it’s also easy to pass out misconceptions...like when Osama bin Laden was killed, someone made up a fake MLK JR quotation, and it spread like wildfire...Also, people are so angry online you can’t read the comments on any news article, If a woman is attacked, she’s called a slut or a whore which I don’t think many people would be willing to say out loud... I also think it encourages slacktivism to an extent like ‘I signed my name, that’s enough’ when actual protests and stuff are still needed... at the same time it’s easier to donate to a cause or if you have a disability or live far away from a big city, you can still get in on the action (online interview).”

In a small group (3 person) FtF interview, participants again negotiate their way through the complex and contradictory aspects of social media within the political sphere (H and J are both graduate students, L works in human resources).

- H:** Like in terms of actually doing something, Facebook isn't that effective. People are like "oh I liked this, I shared that," I think they call it "slacktivism" ...
- J:** It seems like internationally, social media can be really effective, but in the U.S. we just use it to promote some identity.
- L:** Yeah I would agree with that. Liking something does absolutely zero in terms of affecting real action.
- H:** Well I mean, yeah Liking something doesn't do much, but if you think about the Occupy movement, a lot of people learned about it through social media, and made plans and organized through social media. I don't think it would have taken off like it did otherwise.
- L:** Yeah that's true, it was really effective there. And I also think that actual policy makers are more accessible now. Like they have Facebook pages and I think it gives us another avenue to get their ear.
- H:** Yeah and like when people bombed certain politicians Facebook pages protesting legislation that hurt women's health. That was great like "oh, I have this rash on my vagina, what should I do?" If enough people take part, it does get the word out.
- J:** Yeah, I mean it can be really effective, and like you guys are saying, it has shown itself to be effective, and to be honest I've learned about a lot of stories on Facebook, I just think a lot of people use it in shallow and narcissistic ways.
- L:** Oh absolutely, like everyone shared KONY 2012 stories but not a single one of them did anything. In fact they've probably forgotten about it. So I mean, there is definitely the shallow identity-affirmation shit, but it can also be a platform for people who might not otherwise be heard. So it's kind of like, take the good with the bad.
- H:** Yeah, it all depends on how you use it I guess.

Here, through disagreement and concession, this group of participants navigates the tensions between action and identity work, organization and isolation, access and the façade of access, multiplicity of voice and a din of noise—all in the course of about ten minutes.

## 5. Conclusions

In sum, participants experience social media with a sense of ambivalence. They subjectively engage with social media in the uncertain space between utopic hopes and dystopic fears. I wish to conclude by noting the sharpness of this experiential ambivalence in light of social media's pervasiveness.

The increasing institutional, structural, formal and informal presence of social media in everyday life makes it quite difficult (perhaps impossible) to "opt out." Certainly, one can "log off" (e.g., delete social media accounts), but one cannot escape a social system that increasingly operates on and through social technologies. These are the spaces in which social events are planned, shared, and recapitulated; where businesses promote their wares; where political messages are spread and dialogues engaged; where jobs are listed, and employees vetted [48]. Indeed, the decision to "log off"

or “disconnect” no more precludes a person from navigating a social media infused system than deciding not to own a car precludes a person from navigating the transportation system in a cul-de-sac infused suburb.

P.J. Rey [54] describes this phenomena on Cyborgology.org evoking Haraway’s language of a “non-optional system.” He states:

“Regardless of whether we communicate face-to-face or through digital technologies, our conversations will travel to and from one or the other medium. And, where we are absent, others will continue to chat about us and to produce documents that come to represent our lives to the world. Technology is so deeply intertwined with our social reality that, even when we are logged off, we remain a part of the social media ecosystem. We can’t opt out of social media, without opting out of society altogether (and, even then, we’ll inevitably carry traces).”

This sense of non-optionalness is keenly reflected in my interview with a middle-aged woman (T, healthcare worker) whose desire to resist connection could no longer be supported by the hardware offered by her mobile phone company. She says:

“I cried when they made me give up my 2G phone because they won’t support it anymore. I liked my phone...I know it sounds dumb, but the old fashioned flip phone was not as intrusive...I was attached to my phone because it was simple and not super connected (online interview).”

In this vein, many participants talk about *attempts* to “log off”—deleting or deactivating their Facebook accounts. Certainly, these participants deactivate for valid reasons—too much time spent socializing; too much energy spent comparing oneself to others; not enough control over privacy, *etc.* And in turn, they report some benefits of deactivation—greater productivity; fewer social obligations; increased focus on home/family life. By and large, however, they reactivate their accounts earlier than intended (one participant reports reactivating within 24 hours of deactivation, despite the intention to stay logged off for a month), discuss feelings of social exclusion, and report difficulty in keeping up with local and global news. As one participant (L, human resources worker) says:

“It’s like I was in a little bubble, I had no idea what was going on and I missed a lot. People didn’t contact me because I wasn’t on Facebook, or they talked about things I wasn’t familiar with, and to be honest, it was a little awkward when I saw some of my friends offline, like we had missed a beat or something (online interview).”

A full discussion of social media as part of a non-optional system is worthy of a full scale analysis, one which is beyond the scope of the present work. Rather, I note this non-optionalness here to demonstrate the weight of ambivalence in the experiential relationship between humans and new technologies.

I conclude now with a remark and a link back to bioethicist Carl Elliott, arguing that, like those who brood over medical enhancement technologies, we too brood over social media usage, checking our accounts both excitedly and begrudgingly, updating while worrying about our own narcissism, commenting on Friends’ profiles while promising ourselves we will make plans with them soon, deleting our profiles and purging our networks, only to return to these spaces and re-grow these connections with a sense of familiarity, guilt, warmth, annoyance, excitement, uncertainty, and unease.

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