

Digital Self-Control and the Neoliberalization of Social Media Well-Being

NIALL DOCHERTY
Microsoft Research, USA

Popular debates surrounding social media well-being target individual habit as the locus of critique and change. This article argues that this constitutes a commitment to responsabilized constructs of neoliberal well-being and moralized ideas of atomistic self-care. Empirical analysis reveals how such visions are discursively and materially embedded in both the well-being tools offered by social media platforms and in the mindful “hacks” of user praxis endorsed by their critics. This is shown to operate as part of a sociotechnical imaginary of self-control where the structural factors crucial to well-being are ignored. Well-being is instead aligned with personal choice. This article exposes the contingency of this view by presenting relational concepts of well-being, showing how critical, comparative interpretive analysis can better account for the psychic costs of the attention economy, thus reinvigorating the issue of social media well-being as a site of political action.

Keywords: digital well-being, social media, health, neoliberalism, responsabilization, power, sociotechnical imaginaries

At the launch of the Samsung Galaxy S9 in 2018, Conor Pierce, head of Samsung UK, called for users to resist thoughtless engagement with their smartphones. On the surface, this was a reaction to popular fears that technological imbrication leads to a loss of personal autonomy. “Let’s turn the roles completely on their head,” Pierce proclaimed, “Let’s make the device be the slave and we’ll be the master” (Gibb, 2018, para. 4). Pierce pointed toward a suite of features that granted users the chance to keep a grip of their digital habits, including activity trackers and dashboards of time spent on device. Here, forming habits of conscious use are presented as the key to regaining control within the potentially overwhelming digitization of contemporary life. Ruha Benjamin (2019) has lucidly explored such discourses of technological domination as expressions of racialized power. Accordingly, this idea of taking back control of technology can be seen to smuggle in exclusionary, and politicized, conceptualizations of mastery that requires further critical scrutiny. In this article, I argue that Pierce’s words, although particularly jarring, in fact reveal a common problematic vision of personal self-control that is pervasive within contemporary concerns surrounding digital habit.

Specifically, this article focuses on the recent controversies surrounding social media well-being (Barr, 2020). I argue that the call to adopt conscious habits of social media use, in answer to the perceivably

Niall Docherty: ndocherty@microsoft.com
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damaging effects of “too much” social media, is shaped by a sociotechnical imaginary of digital self-control. Jasanoff (2015) defines sociotechnical imaginaries as “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order, attainable through, and supportive of advances in science and technology” (p. 4). As an analytic, sociotechnical imaginaries draw our attention to the social values, cultural norms, and political visions that shape the collective hopes and fears surrounding technology, while also being able to reveal how such discourses become embedded in technological objects and systems. This article looks beyond the taken-for-granted positioning of self-control on social media as the promised path to well-being. It instead highlights the operative assumptions implicit within this vision, and sets out the limiting effects generated through its reproduction in both mediatized discourse and in material social media practices.

Although systemic literature reviews show a range of psychological responses to social media (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2019), the contemporary debate surrounding healthy social media use is structured around the notion that increased passive social media use could lead to negative psychological outcomes (Verduyn et al., 2015). These could include declines in scores of subjective well-being (Kross et al., 2013) and the exacerbation of existing issues with self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Blomfield Neira & Barber, 2014; Feinstein et al., 2013). On one side of this debate, the psychological harms of social media are examined in relation to their functioning within the so-called attention economy (Cyphers & Gebhart, 2019). Numerous self-help books, tech industry insiders, and documentaries such as *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020) argue that the targeting of user attention through persuasive design (Fogg, 2003) leads to negative well-being outcomes, primarily by draining user attention in unproductive directions and increasing opportunities for negative social comparison (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016). Predictive algorithms and haptically entrapping user interfaces are understood as nudges (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), which aim to maximize profitable user interactions on platforms. As such, platforms are said to be engaged in the core task of monetizing user attention through manipulative technical processes.

The opposite standpoint in this debate, largely assumed by social media platforms themselves, suggests that negative well-being outcomes only arise from users passively engaging with platforms (Docherty, 2020). Companies like Facebook, for instance, argue that how users engage on social media is the determining factor in their well-being (Burke & Kraut, 2016). In this framework, interacting with close ties online (Granovetter, 1973), engaging in one-on-one communications, posting regular updates, and even taking breaks from screen time altogether are treated as positive actions that lead to user flourishing. Conversely, passively scrolling feeds, lurking on friends’ profiles, poor personal time management, and general inaction on platforms are presented as threats to user well-being (Ginsberg & Burke, 2017). It is, therefore, argued that adopting controlled and active habits on platforms avoids harmful well-being outcomes.

It is important to note that these practices of taking back control of the time spent on platforms further entangle the lives of users within digitized modes of capitalist accumulation and behavioral management (Pace, 2018). Specifically, these active interactions and conscious engagements increase the profitable data traces that platforms can compile, and sell, as user demographics to interested third parties (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2017). However, despite this recognition, critics of the political economy of social media similarly suggest that adopting active habits on social media is the key mitigation against its psychological harms. For example, self-help books advise users to adopt behavioral and technical hacks of

mindful use (Rashid & Kenner, 2019), charities urge users to use the well-being tools offered on platforms (Young Minds, 2021), and well-being influencers promote the health benefits of temporary disconnection practices (Jorge, 2019). Both the dissenters and designers of social media habit, although ostensibly on opposite sides of the debate, thus land on the same solution to its potential harms: conscious use and individual self-control.

This article engages with the analytic of the sociotechnical imaginary to explore why this peculiar parallel exists. It begins by setting out the key theoretical terms of engaging with sociotechnical imaginaries, outlining the type of interpretive research methodology that is advanced throughout the article. Through an analysis of current mediatised debates of social media well-being, the second section shows how positive well-being outcomes on social media are aligned with the personal choice of healthy digital habits. In doing so, I show that the responsibility for social media well-being is said to rest squarely on the shoulders of individual users alone. Therefore, whether understood as a necessary response to technological manipulation or simply an expression of healthy use, more personal self-control online constitutes the shared desirable future that structures current debates surrounding social media well-being.

The middle section of this article outlines how this desirable sociotechnical future is forged within the historical intellectual and political environment of its articulation. This means drawing attention to the processes of neoliberalization that have shaped, and continue to shape, social, cultural, and political forms of life in global contexts (Jessop, 2018; Machado Aráoz & Lisdero, 2019). Specifically, I argue that the targeting of individual habit as the key marker of well-being on social media reveals a shared commitment to a responsabilized construct of neoliberal well-being and its corresponding (reductive) vision of the atomistic human agent of controlled habit. The final sections of this article argue that the sociotechnical imaginary of social media self-control divorces human subjects from their envioning technological world, thus limiting the scope of applicable social and political interventions. The conclusion argues that if we are to ameliorate the challenging, and uneven, well-being issues that manifest on social media today, we must explore alternative, more relational, visions of digital well-being that do not so rigidly turn on the moralized pivots of neoliberal self-care and personal technological autonomy.

Discursive Materiality, Sociotechnical Imaginaries, Power

When first introduced by Jasanoff and Kim (2009), *sociotechnical imaginaries* referred to national visions of technological progress, as expressed in nation-specific scientific and technological projects. In this iteration, the concept has facilitated productive comparisons between U.S. and South Korean responses to nuclear power (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009), and examined the formation of a particularly Austrian technopolitical identity (Felt, 2015), for example. However, Jasanoff (2015) has further developed the concept to suggest that sociotechnical imaginaries are not "limited to nation-states," but can be employed to elucidate the "myriad ways in which scientific and technological visions enter into the assemblages of materiality, meaning, and morality that constitute robust forms of social life" (p. 4). This expansion of the term can help examine the way discourses and designs of technological progress, such as the debates surrounding healthy social media use, implicitly or explicitly project desirable social futures toward which various scales of society, and the individuals within them, can collectively strive.

In this way, sociotechnical imaginaries are able to course a middle path through the restrictive opposition of structure and agency that often stymie political considerations of social media power (Papacharissi, Streeter, & Gillespie, 2013). The concept is instead able to study the intricate relations that, in the terminology used by Jasanoff (2004), coproduce styles of action appropriate to particular social orders. Examining the way behavioral, intellectual, and moral norms are articulated throughout a shared social world, how they manifest in technological systems, and how they become inculcated within, and through, the individual habits of singular human agents is thus a key point of concern within this framework. Rather than the symmetrically flat ontologies associated with actor-network theory approaches (Law, 1986), whereby human and nonhuman agents are equivalized in a way that could negate the possibility of normative political critique (Amsterdamska, 1990), sociotechnical imaginaries focus on “complex topographies of power and morality as they intersect with the forces of science and technology” (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 22). These imaginations of technological progress are thus said to simultaneously produce what is possible, and what ought to be, for diverse individuals and groups of humans in various sociotechnical contexts.

The analytic framework adopted in this article builds on Foucault’s (1995) thinking that explores how power/knowledge produces grids of intelligibility through which human subjects come to know what they are and how they should act as part of social institutions. The sociotechnical imaginary works within this intellectual tradition by being able to highlight how power and discourse flow through and materialize in technological systems, to set certain modes of self and societal relations in action, as opposed to others. This implicit shaping of subjectivity and activity is consonant with Foucault’s (1986) formulation that “the exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome” (p. 221) in different locations. This opens space to consider how social media position human users in relation to (nonhuman) others through a technological arrangement of intersecting interests and possible activities. Although these relations are in no way unidirectional or closed, frameworks like the sociotechnical imaginary offer the chance to consider how power is unequally distributed throughout sociotechnical environments such as social media. Indeed, highlighting the historical character of particular ways of living with and viewing technological development reveals that all attempts to normalize user interactions are contingent. This, as I show below, can concurrently highlight openings for challenge and change.

This analytic orientation resonates with other methods that seek to explore, and contest, the norms operative within sociotechnical systems. Script analysis (Akrich, 1992), for example, has been used to examine the discursive material gendering of technological devices (Van Oost, 2003), and critical technocultural discourse analysis, which André Brock (2020) has pioneered, works to decenter Western deficit perspectives in the study of information technologies. The sociotechnical imaginary is supplementary to these vital approaches, but is particularly useful for the aims of this article as it invites an interpretive research methodology that uses techniques of comparison between divergent visions of technological and social progress. As Jasanoff (2015) writes,

The challenge for the analyst is to conduct their own comparisons with epistemic charity and due respect for difference: not to apply universal yardsticks for measuring advances toward, or deviance from, allegedly transcendental ideals but instead to reveal, and

destabilize if we are so inclined, the naturalized logics of functioning, self-contained, and self-replicating social and political systems. (p. 25)

With this destabilizing potential explicitly motivating the analysis and arguments that follow, this article begins by explicating the sociotechnical imaginary of digital self-control that is mobilized in the debates surrounding social media well-being. I highlight how an unequal, and perhaps unwarranted, amount of pressure is loaded on the individual user to make the technological changes that supposedly lead to their flourishing. To do this, I analyze the corporate PR messaging of social media platforms, statements made by social media leaders, self-help books, documentaries, and resources released by charitable organizations where this view is expressed. Such messaging promises a future of individual well-being if certain practices of self-control are followed. A key contribution of this article is to show how present-day social media well-being tools and technical hacks also materialize such hopes in tangible technological arrangements through processes of embedding. This demonstrates the way “imaginaries get built into the hard edifices of matter and praxis” (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 323) of the lived, environing world, empirically revealing how discursive power becomes materialized both in social media and through its usage.

Self-Control and “Time Well Spent”

Existing analysis of the PR materials, public-facing blogs, and academic research of social media companies reveals how healthy use is presented as mindful and engaged as opposed to unthinking and repetitious (Docherty, 2020). In a Facebook post from January 2018, for example, Mark Zuckerberg claimed that active engagement on Facebook constitutes “time well spent” (Mosseri, 2018, para. 2) on the platform. Active use is frequently contrasted with passive use by Facebook, and Facebook has repeatedly stated that its user interfaces, such as the News Feed, have been designed to foster active interactions on them (Shen, 2019). The technical targeting of active use on platforms is often justified through appeals to evolutionary psychology, whereby supposedly natural human needs of social belonging are fulfilled by active communications on platforms (Ginsberg & Burke, 2017).

Facebook and Instagram now offer granular controls to facilitate such modes of active human communication. These take the form of various technical tools accessible through social media well-being suites, including activity dashboards, which display average times spent on each platform; daily activity reminders, which allow users to send themselves an alert when they have been on each app for a set period of time; and user controls that can mute push notifications. On Facebook, users can also apply snooze settings to feeds, whereby content from certain users and pages or content that contains certain keywords can be blocked. Similarly, Instagram has also released an “all caught up” feature that displays a message when users have viewed all the content currently displayed on their feed (Instagram, 2018). Finally, periodic alerts remind users of Facebook to keep in touch with close ties, and the algorithmic design of both Facebook and Instagram is marketed as prioritizing content that will most likely prompt social interactions (Mosseri, 2018).

Active interactions online, coupled with conscious management of the time spent on digital devices and applications, are thus repeatedly highlighted by social media companies as safeguards against the potential threats posed by their products. Yet, these practices and tools are not only offered as safeguards that mitigate user risk; rather, the type of self-control achievable through them is also presented as the key to human

flourishing online. Work by Beattie and Daubs (2020), for example, reveals the way platforms position themselves as arbiters of the "social good" (para. 2) through their statements on and technical targeting of user well-being. The blog post (Ranadive & Ginsberg, 2018) that announced Facebook and Instagram's new well-being features supports such findings:

We want the time people spend on Facebook and Instagram to be intentional, positive, and inspiring. Our hope is that these tools give people more control over the time they spend on our platforms and also foster conversations between parents and teens about the online habits that are right for them. (para. 1)

This sentiment is also echoed in the vision of digital well-being expressed by Google-owned YouTube. YouTube has its own set of well-being features, which include similar activity dashboards, "take a break" reminders, and notification controls. These features, as YouTube's official announcement of them states, allow users to "take charge" (Marquardt, 2018, para. 1) of their habits on the platform. TikTok similarly markets its own well-being time management tools as ways for users to have "more control" (TikTok, 2021, para. 3) on the platform.

Many platforms have partnered with mental health charities to provide resources for users who may be struggling with their well-being online, but adopting preventive practices of self-control is prioritized as the personal responsibility of users themselves. The links among individual well-being, self-tracking tools, and metrified attention have usefully been explored through studies on the Quantified Self movement (Neff & Nafus, 2016). Yet, the presence of these types of tracking tools on social media platforms demonstrates that such self-knowledge and self-management are now presented as part of normal digital practice by their designers (Stanfill, 2015). Following Dylan Mulvin (2018), moreover, these features that target user well-being can usefully be considered as media prophylactics: technologies that ratify and stabilize certain techniques of healthy living.

As outlined in the introduction, the appeals to active engagement and user well-being also carry obvious economic incentives for platforms. Adam Mosseri, then head of News Feed at Facebook, for example, has explicitly stated that maintaining healthy users on Facebook "will be good for our [Facebook's] community and our business over the long term" (Mosseri, 2016, para. 10). Healthy users, put bluntly, are more valuable alive and active, and their cultivation increases the likelihood of profitable user engagement with platforms in the future. This serves as an example of what Michelle Murphy (2017) refers to as the economization of life prevalent in neoliberal capitalism, whereby living beings, human or nonhuman, are transformed into, and have value extracted from them as "generative forms of capital" (p. 13). William Davies (2011) further reveals how pursuing the well-being of workers has become an "economic-policy priority" (p. 68) for multinational corporations and nation-states, precisely because workers can only work, and thus remain productive, if they are mentally and physically able to do so. This synthesis between modes of active digital well-being and the continued growth of platforms yields similar effects: Adopting active habits of self-control more deeply entwines users within apparatuses of capitalist accumulation.

However, although this acknowledgment is the starting point for many contemporary critiques of the capitalist relations of power produced through social media habit, the dichotomy of active/passive use and the corresponding plea for conscious time management online are oddly present in popular proposals of social

media resistance. A high-profile recent example of this, for instance, is the Netflix documentary film *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020). This film begins by outlining how social media platforms extract value from user attention and interactions online. However, after highlighting how such practices could be deleterious to user well-being, specifically by draining attention in unproductive directions and increasing opportunities for negative social comparison, the film lands on a simplistic, and, as I show below, politically problematic solution. Namely, the perceived psychological ills wrought by too much social media are said to be neutralized by better digital self-control and greater personal autonomy of the time spent online. Well-being on social media is therefore tacitly assumed to be, and presented as, the sole responsibility of individual users. This is the very same view endorsed by platforms themselves. This reveals the presence of a sociotechnical imaginary of digital self-control that limits how users are commonly led to understand, and act on, their social media well-being.

This shared solutionism also appears in the self-help materials that offer answers to the psychological problems raised by extensive social media use. For example, a range of self-help books suggests how users can resist the advances of manipulative technical design through conscious digital interactions (Alter, 2017). Such books include *Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life* (Eyal, 2020) and *Offline: Free Your Mind From Smartphone and Social Media Stress* (Rashid & Kenner, 2019). In this literature, the essential means to achieve greater social media self-control is by being cognizant of the time spent on various platforms and practicing active techniques of self-discipline. Elsewhere, online life coaches, such as the *Digital Detox Coach* (Corby, 2020), reproduce the notion that social media users currently reside in a distraction economy and urge users to take back control of the time spent online through regular technological breaks.

The imagined benefits of voluntary disconnection are also expounded in popular self-help drives such as the Whole Life Challenge in the United States, which tasks its participants to give up social media for a week (Roy, 2019). Similarly, UK mental health charities such as Mind (2021) advocate periods of screen-free time in everyday life, and Young Minds (2021) has campaigned for youths to #OwnYourFeed through the active curation of their social media feeds and profiles. In governmental policy spheres, the Chief Medical Officers in the United Kingdom (S. C. Davies, Atherton, Calderwood, & McBride, 2019) have likewise released guidance on the psychological benefits of individually limiting social media activity. In a different arena, Ana Jorge (2019) reveals how temporary disconnection is a common mode of well-being influencer activity, functioning as part of aspirational lifestyle presentations. Jorge shows how device-free detoxes are presented by influencers as ways to "gain control over their time" (p. 11) online. The irony of these practices of disconnection ultimately being shared on social media posts is not lost on Jorge, who argues that such posts reinforce the commodification of sociality online in a way that is actually "restorative of the informational capitalism the culture of connectivity is part of" (p. 3).

Despite this recognition, the website for the Center for Humane Technology (2021), a nongovernmental organization founded by former tech industry insiders and key contributors to the film *The Social Dilemma*, urges users to "regain control" (para. 1) over their digital habits. Users are to do this by adopting changes in their behavior online. Techniques for control include blocking push notifications on devices, taking breaks of tech-free time, utilizing grayscale on devices to limit the alluring color of applications, and creating physical distance from technology by having device-free zones in the home. Overall, the Center for Humane Technology aims to nurture personal mindfulness on social media instead of unthinking, mechanical repetition.

Thus, learning to practice digital self-control remains the preeminent safeguard to the perceived psychological dangers of social media on oppositional sides of the social media well-being debate. Within this shared sociotechnical imaginary, greater digital autonomy is the pathway to user flourishing and a healthier technological future for users. Much in the same way that Samsung's UK leader Conor Pierce called for the hierarchy of humans and their devices to be flipped, the sociotechnical imaginary of digital self-control impels humanity to master technology as opposed to being mastered by it. As a result, the hopes and fears surrounding social media well-being are spoken about in terms of individual responsibility and the behavioral fulfillment of personal autonomy. The remainder of this article outlines the specific political character of this shared horizon of possibility, highlights its deficiencies, and outlines viable alternatives that could emerge in its wake.

Well-Being and Neoliberal Self-Care

Implicit in the sociotechnical imaginary of social media self-control is the flattening of digital well-being with an idealized vision of personal choice. In the materials analyzed above, it is posited that users of social media can reach a state of digital wellness through making good choices and engaging with social media, and the well-being tools offered through them, in a controlled way. In this section, I argue that this belief is a tangible inflection of the neoliberal milieu of its articulation.

As a policy framework, neoliberalism prioritizes the marketization of public services, the installation of the enterprise form as a model of government and social organization, the dissolution of social insurance and welfare state models, the protection of personal property rights, and the safeguarding of and legitimate intervention in competitive financial markets (Harvey, 2007). In terms of its historical lineage, neoliberalism has been linked to ordoliberal projects in post-WWII Germany (Foucault, 2010), the economic thought of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman (Stedman Jones, 2012), and the globalized institutional practices of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (Sondarjee, 2020). These policy measures, replete with the discursive championing of free-market principles in general, have been characteristic of Westernized styles of global governance, at national and international levels, for the past four decades (Mirowski, 2014).

On the surface, the recent large-scale state interventions in public health as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic counter the imagined neoliberal rejection of state intervention. However, as Graham Burchell (1996) pointedly demonstrates, neoliberalism has never been committed to a style of *laissez-faire* governance. Rather, neoliberalism is better understood as a political project that constructs the conditions for a competitive market rationality to pervade throughout political, cultural, and social spheres. As such, Mark Pilkington (2016) describes neoliberalism as "not merely an intellectual edifice, but a continuous process of constructing a shifting reality, that of neoliberalization" (p. 226).

A rich seam of scholarship explores how processes of neoliberalization manifest in current orientations to mental health and well-being (Binkley, 2014; Sointu, 2005). Such studies highlight how discourses that focus on the choice of living well can be related to a particular style of entrepreneurial subjectivity. Through this lens, well-being is conceptualized chiefly as an outcome of individual decision making. In the psychological literature, however, well-being is a broad term comprising two primary perspectives: (1) hedonism, which measures subjective experience of happiness, affect, and life satisfaction;

and (2) eudaimonism, which measures positive relationships with self and others and experiences of living well (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Negative experiences of well-being, as manifest in anxiety, depression, fatigue, or low self-esteem, for instance, have also been shown to be distinctly relational, involving neurological, hormonal, and behavioral processes interacting with subjective experiences of adverse enviroing conditions (B. J. Brown & Baker, 2013).

Public health scholar Matt Fisher (2019), for example, shows how living in hostile social environments, where racism, sexism, and ableism are operative, for instance, increases the levels of stress hormones in the body so as to negatively impact feelings of well-being. Fisher writes, "Cumulative exposure to stressors over the life course correlates positively with worse physical and mental health outcomes, and differences in such exposure contributes to health inequalities between groups according to gender, race, and socioeconomic status" (p. 3). However, through the neoliberal frame, these physiological and environmental relations are largely ignored. Instead, individuals walk a path to positive well-being simply by making optimal, marketized choices of healthy living. In lieu of state-provided mental health welfare, whether because of its actual nonexistence or its de facto ineffectiveness due to limited funding as in the United Kingdom (Cummins, 2018), individuals are tasked with making changes to their lifestyle in order to ameliorate their subjective feelings of negative well-being. This frequently involves suggested changes in diet, exercise routines, sleep patterns, and stress management techniques (National Health Service, 2021). This means that individuals must avoid so-called unhealthy actions as they navigate their way through life (e.g., passive social media use) and adopt healthy actions (e.g., active social media use) to live well. As Wendy Brown (2005) demonstrates, this results in the production of neoliberal subjects of self-care, whose moral worth is predicated on their "ability provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions" (p. 4).

The vision of well-being as self-management mobilizes a number of tacit assumptions that generate particular political effects, primarily by shaping how healthy living can be collectively imagined and, in turn, acted on. For example, although sufficient levels of sleep, nutritious food, managed screen time, and regular exercise can reasonably be correlated with well-being benefits, the ability to "choose" to adopt such practices depends on the existence of a number of supporting conditions. People need spare time to exercise, sufficient monies to purchase nutritious food, and working arrangements that facilitate routinized, and dependable, screen and sleep patterns. "Good" choices are thus prestructured by contingent social, financial, and environmental circumstances.

However, by assuming that all individuals are equally disposed to choose healthy lifestyles, and by placing the burden of health solely on individual choices alone, neoliberal conceptualizations of responsabilized well-being divert attention away from the wider circumstantial fields that structure the range of choices open to individuals at any given moment in time. In this way, such visions of purely individualized well-being ignore the unequal social determinants of health that impact individual experiences of well-being in different social spheres (Viner et al., 2012). These include specific issues that arise through racial inequalities, class disparities, and insufficient housing, as well as actual governmental policy decisions, labor arrangements, and socioeconomic conditions (World Health Organization, 2003; Yearby, 2020). Such structural factors create uneven conditions that exist prior to the idealized personal choices said to lead to healthy living.

The sociotechnical imaginary of digital self-control makes it difficult to address these issues by presenting social media well-being as simply a matter of good active choices. Technical hacks, active communication, the utilization of well-being tools, time-management tactics—choosing these behaviors is said to lead to well-being online. In this way, the sociotechnical imaginary of self-control focuses on the personal lifestyle choices and digital habits of single users as the key determinants in their subjective experience of well-being. Although the ability to correlate increased passive social media use with increased depression and anxiety is undoubtedly important for clinical treatments, we ought to also recognize that the individual tendency for depression and anxiety is unevenly distributed throughout the social body prior to its manifestation in online contexts. The free equal choice of well-being online, in other words, is not quite as straightforward as is often told.

In ignoring the structural factors important to well-being—adequate housing, health, work, income, and structural fairness, for instance—the sociotechnical imaginary of self-control negates the potential to highlight how inequalities in these areas are crucial factors in societal and individual feelings of unwellness. Both the ability and subsequent need to address such issues from a psychological standpoint are therefore foreclosed. This constitutes an inherently political foreclosure that entrenches ideological visions of an atomistic society inhabited by self-contained and self-reliant neoliberal agents, divorced from the social world around them. This is not to suggest that the sincere critics of social media are actively endorsing such processes of neoliberalization, but promoting a vision of digital well-being as individualized self-control ultimately has the same effects: the maintenance of hegemonic neoliberal worldviews.

The Technological Embedding of Responsibilization

I have argued that discourses and designs of “healthy” active use on social media reproduce modes of capitalist value extraction and processes of neoliberalization. Yet, these ideas that swirl around social media well-being also produce a moral economy (Adams, Murphy, & Clarke, 2009) that materially sanctions user activity along historicized and exclusionary lines of individualized autonomy. Imagining the action of individual subjects on social media in these moralized terms thus functions as a conduit of power, sustaining certain interpretations of, and making more likely, certain forms of human conduct at the expense of others. A key contribution of this article demonstrates how these interpretations are materially embedded in seemingly innocuous, perhaps even ostensibly beneficent, technical affordances and modes of user praxis.

For example, the fears that users could become slaves to their habits, and the corresponding hope that conscious activity leads to freedom, are materialized in the dashboards, behavioral analytics, and granular tools of self-control now accessible on social media platforms. Repeating the words of YouTube quoted above, such features are marketed as providing a way for users to “take charge” of their viewing habits online. A value judgment is implicit here: Users ought to avoid mindless video consumption on YouTube in favor of cultivated viewing choices. These time-conscious behaviors, and the tools that nurture them, are positioned as a safeguard against the dangers of unthinking automaticity, instead offering a means to stay active and engaged online. Such ideas are also bound in the well-being suites now offered on Facebook and Instagram, with the time trackers, activity analytics, and granular notification controls providing a means for users to choose the habits that are supposedly right for them. Here, we can see how

normative ideas surrounding the perfectible, atomistic, and, crucially, autonomous human user are embedded in the discourses and designs of social media well-being currently disseminated by platforms.

This idea that positions active habits as superior to passive habits finds its origins in Kantian moral philosophy and corresponding Western Enlightenment conceptualizations of the transcendental subject (Kant, 1798/2007; Paton, 1966). Active habits are viewed as the key motor through which universal human progress can occur, with intellectual and habitual passivity always posing the threat of moral and social denigration. In this framework, the chief task of human development involves controlling the internal tendency toward gratuitous habitual sloth, instead striving to cultivate higher, less instantly gratifying, human practices (Valverde, 1998). In the more recent psychological terminology of self-control, Callie H. Burt (2020) describes this as the "effortful restraining of oneself against immediate temptation in the service of more enduringly valued goals" (p. 55).

These (not unproblematic) views are implicit in the prevalent discourses and designs of social media well-being and digital self-control. Again evidencing the limiting parallels that exist between prominent critics of social media and companies themselves, we find them embedded in the technical tips offered by well-meaning interlocutors, who seek to free users from the imagined tyranny of social media subjugation. For example, managing the time spent on platforms, changing device color schemes, personalizing notification reminders, and adopting practices of self-tracking are similarly offered as means to reestablish mastery, and thus autonomy, over individual digital habits. Therefore, whether expressed as a critique or endorsement, the sociotechnical imaginary of digital self-control promises a future of human flourishing that continually reduces our understanding of social media to that of an object through which the users, as autonomous subjects, can master themselves through rational action. Philosopher of technology Lisa S. Nelson (2018) recognizes this view as the dominant paradigm through which "moral responsibility" (p. 8) is individually assigned on social media today. By separating human subjects from the object-filled world around them in this way, self-control is tacitly imposed as an individuated moral duty.

Bruno Latour (1993) shows how the subject/object binary observable here works to entrench hierarchical relations of human/nonhuman that are immanent to modern processes of purification. Others have further demonstrated how these dualisms are tangible in historical systems of political, social, and environmental exploitation (Césaire, 2000). Peter Park (2013), for example, shows how the Western subject of good habit and civilized reason was positioned as superior to indigenous peoples in processes of colonization, serving to justify violent interventionist colonial practices. Elsewhere, Anna L. Peterson (2001) shows how the abstraction of human culture from nature sets the basis for the extraction of the Earth's natural resources, which have led, in part, to the severe ecological thresholds faced today. By enjoining users to reestablish their rightful mastery over their technological environment, the sociotechnical imaginary of social media self-control reproduces the same hierarchical human/nonhuman relations. Controlling the affordances and well-being tools on social media are offered as a way for users to control the "basest" aspects of their essential, potentially unruly, humanity. Through this type of digital self-mastery, the user is promised a future of autonomous human flourishing online.

Political scientists (Marwah, 2013), cultural theorists (Wynter, 2003), and feminist philosophers (Huseyinzedegan, 2014) have outlined the exclusionary underpinnings of this hope for human autonomy,

and this vital work clearly demonstrates the need to also think beyond such reductive dualisms in our discussions of social media well-being today. Inspiration can be found from scholars working in critical medical humanities, such as Atkinson, Bagnall, Corcoran, South, and Curtis (2020), who move away from discussing well-being in terms of personal habits and “individual failings” (p. 1909) in favor of a more relational view of well-being that is better able to account for the social and environmental factors involved in human flourishing. A community-based model of well-being is offered, which grants a “greater focus on social and collective life” (Atkinson et al., 2020, p. 1909). This view emphasizes the “relations with the diverse processes and places that hinder or enable us to become well together” (Atkinson et al., 2020, p. 1910). Here, living well is not the sole outcome of individual choice, but is dependent on sustaining and supportive community relations.

Elsewhere, Sarah C. White (2017) considers well-being as an emergent process, something “that happens in and over time through the dynamic interplay of personal, societal and environmental structures and processes, interacting at a range of scales, in ways that are both reinforcing and in tension” (p. 1909). The human subject of well-being is said to be produced through these dynamic processes in such a way that complicates the prioritization of personal autonomy, agency, and choice. White’s view of well-being is instead grounded in “a relational ontology that views relationality as logically prior to individuals, rather than vice versa. It celebrates multiplicity and resists fixity, seeking always to extend possibilities for relationship” (p. 133). In this way, the “subjective, material and relational dimensions of well-being are revealed as co-constitutive” (p. 133), as opposed to well-being solely resulting from individual will and individual will alone. Although beyond the scope of this current article, this relational vision of human subjectivity could form part of the theoretical basis for future studies of social media well-being that do not repeat the moralization of habit found in the sociotechnical imaginary of self-control. Rather, this alternative theoretical basis could help empirically examine how social media coproduce users, and thus the style of action enacted on platforms, through facilitating particular forms of situated agentic activity, social interactions, and communication.

When well-being is associated with environing relations and specific times and places, “involving the intimate flow of life-courses, inter-generational relations, processes of stability and sustainability” (Atkinson et al., 2020, p. 1090), new types of policy measures that can address these issues come to the fore. I argue that we should not view social media well-being in isolation from the structural conditions that we know impact well-being on a more general scale. Facing up to hereditary inequities, prejudice, discrimination, and environmental disparities—for instance, perhaps through more equitable wealth distribution; higher taxation; tougher antidiscrimination laws; or better, greener, social housing—ought to be incorporated into our discussions on the factors that could lead to, and ameliorate, social media activity that is harmful to users. When viewed through the dominant atomized framework of individual habit, which is currently employed to discuss social media well-being, these suggestions may seem unworkable, perhaps even irrelevant. Yet, it is precisely this type of holistic, explicitly politicized approach that is needed to challenge the prevailing neoliberal presentation of social media well-being as an outcome of equalized choices. Refusing to simply target individual users as the locus of critique and lifestyle change, and instead reframing formerly individualized issues as social issues, are thus potentially radical political acts (Cvetkovich, 2013).

Conclusion

Analyzing and interpreting sociotechnical imaginaries enables us to “direct our attention toward the practices of collective sense making and the tacit assumptions that allow collectives to hold together” (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 338). This article has highlighted the limiting parallels that exist between the mediated critics and purveyors of social media technologies, revealing how a sociotechnical imaginary of digital self-control structures popular debates surrounding social media well-being. I have argued that a reductive vision of responsabilized well-being and ideal user autonomy are embedded in this imaginary, in such a way that maintains joint processes of capitalist value extraction and neoliberalization. Although examining the well-being impacts of the attention economy is a valuable tool of critique, and can serve as a useful starting point for establishing the psychic costs of capitalism in general, the popular criticisms of social media well-being outlined above end up repeating the type of assumptions, consciously or otherwise, that allow neoliberalized health inequalities to be reproduced and implicitly justified. If we are to fully unleash the critical force of this type of well-being analysis and avoid perpetuating damaging political effects, we must move beyond these visions.

Rather than simply correlate negative well-being outcomes on social media with poor behavioral choices, we ought to examine the structural factors that create uneven feelings of well-being in our communities as they entwine with the affordances of social media. That is, it is important to recognize that the anxiety, depression, and low-self-esteem associated with increased social media use are not simply the result of exploitative technological entrapment or a personal inability to “control” oneself online. As I have demonstrated above, such feelings also respond to personal pressures arising from intersecting social, economic, and political disparities. When we notice certain groups or individuals with declining well-being on social media, perhaps we could do better to try to understand the lived conditions from which they arise, as work by Bekalu and colleagues (2019) gestures toward, rather than view social media use in abstraction from the inequities in the social world.

This type of analytic reorientation works to decenter behaviorist logics and technologically determinist thinking, allowing the wider issues surrounding social media well-being to come to fore. In doing so, we will be better equipped to fully understand how the technical nudges of social media platforms, which are undoubtedly designed to extract value from user attention for capitalist gain, may detrimentally impact some groups of users more than others. This would lift the burden of “fixing” social media well-being off the individual user alone, opening new connections between feelings of digital unwellness and unequal dynamics of power “offline.” On this basis, the issue of social media well-being could become something more than is currently imagined: a spark for new political interventions and a new locus for social change.

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