

Severing the String

by Sylvie Moran

I once made the mistake of mentioning my Finsta in front of my mother. Confused, she asked me to explain this unfamiliar term. A Finsta, I told her, is an alternative Instagram account hidden to all except close friends. The term is a combination of ‘Fake’ and ‘Instagram,’ but the ‘Fake’ component is misleading – these accounts allow free and unfiltered expression to come more easily. I then had to weasel my way out of explaining why I could never, in a million years, let her see mine.

In a certain sense, Finstas harken back to the days of the early virtual world, or “Web 1.0,” which writer and Internet denizen Jia Tolentino describes in her essay, “The I in the Internet” (5). Back then, online experiences often centered around creating and visiting highly personal, often frivolous web pages based on shared interests; these pages were like Finstas. But sometime in 2012, the year Tolentino identifies as the Internet’s “tipping point,” Web 1.0 began its decline into Web 2.0: today’s “feverish, electric, unlivable hell,” filled with trolling, hate, and absurd grandstanding (7). The increasing frequency of controversies like Pizzagate – an alt-right conspiracy theory that linked a pizzeria in DC to a child sex trafficking ring supposedly controlled by the Democratic Party – suggested to many that “the worst things about the internet were now determining, rather than reflecting, the worst things about offline life” (11). These problems, Tolentino argues, stem in part from the Internet’s insidious ability “to distend our sense of identity” (12).

Tolentino draws on Erving Goffman’s 1959 book *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, placing his concept of social performance as a means “to communicate an identity” in a new context: cyberspace (13). According to Goffman, every social encounter

necessitates some form of performance, where we conceal some parts of our identity in order to highlight others (12-13). Such is no longer the case, however. Online, Tolentino notes, “[the] audience never has to leave” and thus “the performance never has to end” (15). Living up to our own online personas is an exhausting and high-stakes task, dooming users to strive constantly for an unachievable ideal. Perhaps this is why using social media makes many of us feel so deflated: the system cannot accommodate the inevitable mistakes and human imperfections. Today’s Internet, encouraging self-exposure and personal appeals, leads to what Tolentino identifies as “hyper-visibility”: users are required to “promise everything to an indefinitely increasing audience at all times” (16). Any public profile can be seen by anyone, at any time. Even a rarely-updated Facebook profile reveals more about the average person than has ever before been publicly available. We have greater access to each other than at any other time in history, but do we know each other better for it?

Not necessarily. More often, the identities that users present online do not emerge “‘as an incidental by-product’ . . . of activity” but rather as an intentional construction (Goffman qtd. in Tolentino 19). Social performance, Goffman argues, requires that we selectively filter out certain aspects of our identities, allowing people to choose how they want to represent themselves. Concealing and curating our identities are so central to social media usage, however, that we often begin to believe we can get away with even the most difficult performances (13). Through filtering, struggling teenagers can make themselves appear more glamorously extroverted, and overworked moms can turn their lives into fairy tales. Such intricate performances are still possible offline, but the facade can also drop away at any moment. By contrast, the moments online when these facades drop away, when our online masks slip, are so rare that they often become highly publicized spectacles. Many users refuse to share content that would deviate from their desired online narrative.

Our real-life identities, however, are constantly changing in ways that are difficult to capture online. In her *New Yorker* essay “How Social Media Shapes Our Identity,” Nausicaa Renner explores how the Internet can trap users in past iterations of ourselves, thereby preventing us from evolving. While social media gives young people greater agency “to produce a narrative of [their] lives” than previous generations, the images – and, by extension, narratives – that we upload are almost impossible to erase (Renner). According to Renner, this is particularly harmful for teenagers who need time for exploration and experimentation when making their identities. Online, we can’t hide our skeletons from the past in the closet – they’re always in plain sight. Through social media, the baggage of our pasts remains visible to anyone who cares to look, compromising our “right to *be forgotten*” (Renner).

Like Tolentino, Renner sees hypervisibility as a dangerous force. The tendency of the web to “scale up mistakes to monumental proportions” that Renner identifies is only possible because the Internet places “personal identity as the center of the universe,” as noted by Tolentino (Renner; Tolentino 14). While Tolentino criticizes the effects of an ever-present online audience, the greater issue, to Renner, is the loss of agency over the presentation of our identities. Renner’s line of thinking extends Tolentino’s metaphor of performance. The ability “to move laterally, as an individual, into a new body or personality” has less to do with visibility than it does with concealment (Renner 3). For those who decide to shift their performance, a cognitive dissonance arises, as it becomes more difficult to conceal outdated or unfavorable aspects of our identity. Seeing as “there’s essentially no backstage on the internet,” there is nowhere to change costumes (Tolentino 15). Without the power to eradicate our past selves, we are forced to compete with the hypervisibility of our own digital ghosts. As a result, even the most authentic of online performances can never perfectly match our offline selves. What gets lost in translation as our performances shift between mediums?

While concealing elements of our identities is central to online expression, we may have even less control over what is concealed than we realize. In his *Harper's Magazine* essay "The Serfdom of Crowds," writer and computer scientist Jaron Lanier describes the social Internet as divided between those who (willingly) shell out their data and those who harvest it. In Lanier's view, everyone who uses social media actively "reduc[es] themselves," along with their very humanity (16). This "self-reduction" is engineered and encouraged by social media corporations in order to make its user base more palatable to advertisers (17). Online, our identities become databases, which in turn are passed off to us as expressions of ourselves. Lanier decries this conversion of identity into data, as it reinforces the illusion "that computers can presently represent human thought or human relationships" (18). That computers and social media algorithms are incapable of replicating human behavior is neither surprising nor necessarily detrimental; however, interacting with social media requires us to accept this illusion as truth.

Our online performances, then, do not represent us to the extent we believe they do. We imagine the filter separating the concealed from the hyper-visible to at least be somewhat under our control. But as Renner reminds us, this power over what we present to the world does not include either the outdated narratives of our lives or the images of us shared "without our consent" (Renner). Lanier takes this lack of agency even further, suggesting that although we think we choose what information we put online, platforms themselves filter us, too. We may be actively involved in "building a self" but our building blocks are limited from the start, leaving our identities far more incomplete than we realize (Tolentino 16). We know that social media profiles can never provide a full picture of a person, but we are led to believe that the performance we produce is identical to the one being viewed. This illusion of agency not only harms us by deceiving us but also "potentially reduc[es] life itself" (Lanier 18). When we accept the filters of social media platforms without being aware of their limitations, we give social media corporations the power to limit the ways we conceive of ourselves. We are

so much more than the sum of our online personas, yet we allow ourselves to be defined by these narrow, shallow parameters.

Social media shapes how we think about our own identities in even more fundamental ways. Behind nearly all online activity lies ever-present algorithms, which dictate much more than just the content we consume. The 2020 docudrama *The Social Dilemma* interviews several industry experts about the most insidious features of social media. As Guillaume Chaslot, a former YouTube employee, explains, it is a common misconception that “the algorithm is designed to give [people] what they really want” (0:59:43-45). In reality, these programs are only “trying to find which rabbit hole is closest to [our] interest” and send us careening down it (0:59:52-55). These rabbit holes influence even the most foundational elements of our identities, from friendships to political outlooks. We think that social media platforms bring funny memes and alarming news articles to our attention because of our active choices, but that control is an illusion. Tech investor Roger McNamee compares this illusion to a classic card trick: a magician tells us to “pick a card, any card,” when, in fact, they are one step ahead, anticipating which card we will pick (0:56:54-55). Our online friendships are filtered through algorithms, meaning that even our relationships in part exist as manufactured products that produce data for corporate interests. As we fall deeper into the rabbit hole, we hand over more and more of our identities to tech giants; in the process, we lose sight of what made us unique.

The warnings presented in *The Social Dilemma* align closely with those Tolentino espouses. Both she and software engineer Justin Rosenstein use the language of energy extraction to describe the dangers of the Internet: “our attention can be mined” at the same time as “selfhood has become capitalism’s last natural resource” (Orlowski 1:25:34-36; Tolentino 12). Capitalism and its partner in crime, advertising, drive this system of identity commodification. The data that we provide social media companies with exists only to attract advertisers, signaling that our society has become

“more concerned with manipulation than with truth or beauty” (Lanier 19). Given this, it may be worth reconsidering why we perform online at all. Ideally, we do it to make connections with others. Clearly, this is far from our current online experience. Despite what we are told, social media is designed not to improve our lives but rather to further corporate economic interests. These companies have no incentive to give us control or agency over our online performances, making it difficult “to detach from one’s past self” (Renner). In a system that runs on data collection, removing any of that data hurts the industry’s bottom line.

Hypervisibility, then, is an even bigger problem than Tolentino suggests. Tolentino overlooks the fact that, in addition to being exploited, our identities are increasingly fabricated by forces beyond our control. More than lacking the agency to accurately represent our identities online, as Renner and Lanier suggest, we lose our agency over the construction of our identities by design. The rabbit hole Chaslot describes forces us to fit within a prefabricated identity, meaning that much of our online performances are planned out for us before we even begin. Rather than actors on an inescapable stage, we have become semi-sentient marionettes, aware that we are performing without seeing the strings guiding us.

So how can we reclaim our performances? Can we, like Pinocchio, free ourselves from the control of an all-powerful puppeteer? “Social and economic collapse,” Tolentino sarcastically suggests, may be the only escape from the dangers of the social Internet (33). But for those of us who don’t want to wait for society to collapse, there are steps we can take now to stave off some of the web’s worst effects. While profitable hypervisibility is an issue of institutions, not individuals, we can start by acknowledging the myriad ways algorithms impact our identities, questioning not only what we see but also *why* we see it. I am not here to advocate for deleting our social media profiles. That being said, as users, we should try to be conscious of the time we spend generating data for corporate use. Every time we use the social Internet, we

permit outside forces to shape our beliefs, relationships, and selfhood. Grounding ourselves in real-life experiences might help us to define ourselves on our own terms. But more than just spending more time offline, we must use our diminishing offline hours to explore who we are and who we want to be. Our uniqueness is worth preserving.

Works Cited

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