> *In our context, the point is that the sarcastic, perverse-sounding statement*, [of Heidegger's] *Das Licht der Öffentlichkeit verdunkelt alles ("The light of the public obscures everything"), went to the very heart of the matter and actually was no more than the most succinct summing-up of existing conditions*. (Arendt, 1995, 6)

The dream of a Cyber-Agora

I will start with a confession: In the 1990ies, I belonged to the camp of the techno-optimists. I believed the internet had the potential of becoming a new public sphere where everybody could access information and engage in debate, that it could produce an open, borderless "marketplace of ideas", which could strengthen both international solidarity and deliberative democracy and give the ordinary citizen a voice. In short, I hoped for a kind of virtual Agora; a meeting place for a plurality of perspectives with the potential for actualizing political power from below. [1]

At first glance there are some striking similarities between an Arendtian public and interaction on social media. Social media platforms are indeed a kind of *public* realm, in that anyone can enter into a conversation, and they are also *spaces of appearance* where the individual can "be seen and heard by everybody" as Arendt phrases it (Arendt, 1958, 50), and thus seems to fit her understanding of the public realm as an intersubjective space where people appear to each other in their individuality while communicating and connecting together. Furthermore, Arendt's public spaces are not limited to traditional institutions, but are mobile and unpredictable since politics "happens" whenever there are people acting together in public: "the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the 'sharing of words and deeds.'" (Arendt, 1958, 198). In other words, action itself creates a public space that can find its proper location anytime and anywhere, and like the Arendtian political realm, the online spaces of social media are simultaneously agonistic, aesthetic and deliberative. Arendt also emphasizes that political life and political power emerges trough speech and action rather than violence or force; and in online communication we are disembodied – we only interact through words and images – and hence the individual cannot *literally* be shouted down, subjected to violence or silenced. In short, it seemed reasonable to think that the very *non-corporeality* of cyberspace would in fact strengthen the role of the Habermasian "force of the better argument".

The development of online communication in the last ten years has, however, given us grounds for curbing our enthusiasm. When it comes to what social networks and Internet activism is able to achieve politically, it may be significantly less than hoped for, and many suggest that traditional groundwork organizing is still the most effective way of making lasting political changes.[2] Political change tends to involve painstaking, long-term efforts to engage with political institutions, and successful political movements that involve high-cost activism (like the civil rights movement in the US) demand strong ties between participants, while social media is based on weak ties.[3] Morozov (2011) suggests that we have radically overestimated the liberating potential of digital communication, and that social media might be used even more effectively by authoritarian regimes as a tool for surveillance, propaganda and control.

Social media as nightmare

The first optimism was followed by a rather dramatic shift in the general tenor in the discourse about the new media, not at least due to the apparent link between online radicalization and "lone-wolf" acts of terrorism. Increasingly, also the quotidian use of social media by the general public became regarded as having pernicious effects on the general political discourse as well as society at large. Rather than the promised cyberspace Utopia, the new digital era appeared as a political nightmare; a confusing hellscape of disinformation, "fake news" and conspiracy theories. The press and other traditional media, as well as Universities and scientific communities are all part of what is often called a truth-producing infrastructure. Although imperfect, such an infrastructure is slow to build, but may be quick to break. A central worry is that social media contributes to an "epistemic crisis" by undermining the trust in traditional institutions of knowledge, replacing rationality with emotion and foster cynicism, resentment and hatred.[4] Studies have thrown light on how misinformation spreads online and leads to polarization and distrust, and this concern is undoubtedly well founded.[5] Without common facts to have different opinions *about*, we cannot make judgments and form opinions, and there can be no rational debate. As Arendt often comments, the prime danger of widespread lying in politics is not gullibility, but cynicism. Cynical people are easily manipulated, because in refusing to believe in any truth whatsoever, they are unable to make up their mind, yet they often continue to conduct themselves *as if* they believe and enforce it against each other.[6] Lack of common ground leads to a "Schmittian" politics, where those who disagree with us are no

longer adversaries or opponents, but *enemies.* With increased aggression, suspicion and a general lack of civility the *agonism* inherent in a vibrant political life threatens (in the terms of Chantal Mouffe) to turn into *antagonism*, and even a threat to liberal democracy itself.

Our crooked timber

In 2016, 'Post-truth' was selected by *Oxford Dictionaries* as word of the year, and we now have a new and continuously expanding vocabulary that describes our online behavior; "going viral", "epistemic bubbles", "echo-chambers", "trolling", "doxxing", "pile-ons", "ratioing", "flaming", "Twitter-storms", "cancelling" and "purity spirals". Regarding digital media, *physical distance* is often seen as part the problem, since online communication is quite different from face-to-face interaction in some important respects. One example is the lack of nonverbal social cues such as tone, facial expressions and body language, which easily lead to misunderstandings and escalation of hostility. The fact that we do not encounter each other bodily, and the possibility of anonymous interaction also contributes to lowering our threshold for verbal aggression. In short: we tend to behave differently – that is, *worse* – online than face to face.

Some of the problems with the new digital media are due to our shared human foibles, like our tendency to tribalism (us-versus-them groupthink) or "cognitive ease"; the tendency to steer clear of facts that would force our brains to work harder, and our tendency to accept familiar information as true.[7] We tend to cherry-pick data to support our existing views and this confirmation bias in turn leads to epistemic bubbles and – if combined with distrust– to echo chambers. That anonymity foster bad behavior is not exactly news, it is something we have been aware of since Plato and the ring of Gyges, but these common human weaknesses become, so to speak, supercharged through the workings of social media: The algorithms that control what is seen, are on the one hand tailor-made for the recipient, and on the other designed to first and foremost *keep our attention,* which is commodified and monetized on social media. In the words of Tristan Harris:

YouTube's recommendation algorithms, which determine 70% of daily watch time for billions of people, "suggest" what are meant to be similar videos but actually drive viewers to more extreme, more negative, or more conspiratorial content because that's what keeps them on their screens longer. (Harris, 2021)

The business model of platforms like Facebook and Twitter commodifies our attention, and what gets the most engagement (clicks, views, shares) are statements and issues *that trigger strong affect – especially anger*. Precisely *how* these algorithms work is also not transparent to the users themselves.[8] In other words, critics, like the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, claim that functions like the "share" "like" and "retweet" buttons – and the engagement algorithms designed around them – have intensified the formation of in-groups, which invariably also leads to more vilifying of out-groups, as well as rewarding outrageous behavior. In short, social media platforms are geared towards capturing our attention and keeping it, and as a result they create more negativity and division as a side effect of the goal of continuous engagement (Haidt, 2022).

Some of these problems can be ameliorated through top-down control and regulation; as Harris puts it: **"**Ultimately it comes down to setting the right rules" (Harris, 2021). That is, the task is to make mega-corporations like Facebook (now Meta) and Twitter responsible for the proliferation of untruths and uncivility on their platforms. However, as Morozov phrases it, it is hard to "imagine an infrastructure that actually cares about the veracity of the data that passes through it, when the entire incentive of the system is to […] increase the number of clicks on the platform".[9] Making the platforms more responsible for their content, changing and tweaking algorithms, making "sharing" a little more difficult, getting rid of "bots" and curbing hate speech by rules and moderation are all forms of regulation that undoubtedly can be beneficial, but some of these solutions also present problems of their own: Should it be up to national law or company policy to decide what is acceptable and what is beyond the pale when it comes to speech? Today the rules seem to be unclear and to some extent arbitrary. Do we risk giving these mega-corporations even more power over our lives by so to speak "deputizing" them to act as the arbiters of public discourse?

The last twist in what we may call the "discourse about the (online) discourse" is, in a way, a worry about the opposite tendency. That is, a tendency to conformity and censoriousness and a narrowing of the scope of what is considered acceptable speech on social media, which threatens to spread to other parts of public life and institutions. The so-called *Harper's* Letter[10] published in 2020 and signed by 153 well-known writers and academics can be seen as part of this new worry. The letter talks about an illiberal public climate, "a vogue for public shaming and ostracism" resulting in a "stifling atmosphere" and "a general chilling effect" on debates, in other words what colloquially has been dubbed "cancel

culture”. In short, the problem is not just *too little* top-down control, but also too much *horizontal control*, as it were.

The ‘social’ in social media

What I will focus on here are problems inherent in social media and online communication that very likely cannot be regulated top-down by simply “setting the right rules”. It is my hypothesis that there is something in the *way we interact on social media* – that is, how we relate to each other on these platforms – that prevents them from becoming a genuine public sphere in an Arendtian sense. The key term here is the *social* in social media.

According to Arendt, what first and foremost characterizes ‘the social’ is *conformity*, and as Ogden Sharpe points out; “Even the basic actions of “liking” and “following” built into social media exhibit a conformist conceptualization of human speech and action, the ends of which are “influence,” imitation, a “following.” (Ogden Sharpe, 2022). In Arendt’s thinking, the social and the political are contrasting concepts, and she uses several distinctions to describe the opposition between the social and the political: Freedom versus necessity, action vs. behavior, plurality vs. sameness, individuality vs. conformism. Arendt describes the “social” as a kind of hybrid between the public and the private realm that threatens to absorb and deform both the private and the public alike.

The social, as Arendt sees it, is first and foremost a realm of sameness, consisting of a mass of people. ‘Masses’ in Arendt’s sense of the word, are large groups of people who are isolated, that is, not held together by concrete common interests, be it political, economical or social (Arendt, 1966, 311-315). Although it is sometimes tempting, I think it would be a misunderstanding to read some kind elitism or culturally conservative critique of leveling (á la Heidegger or Kierkegaard) into Arendt’s concept of the masses: Notably, she does not contrast masses as ”the many” to ”the few” (or to the individual). What creates ‘a mass’ is social atomization and individualization in a competitive society (Arendt 1966, 316-317). It is what people become when the ‘in-between’ of common interest dwindles, and what she calls the *bourgeois attitude* – to be solely concerned with one’s private existence and private welfare – eclipses one’s self-understanding as a citizen. (Arendt 1994, 130 and 1966, 144-46.)

Arendt's distinction between the social and the political is often criticized and problematized by commentators. Hannah Pitkin famously dubbed it "a Blob" and claimed that Arendt mystifies 'the social' by describing it as something with an inscrutable agency; and that we instead should see it as a state of alienation that itself demands explanation and analysis (Pitkin 1998, 6-8, 197, 240). Following Pitkin, I will suggest that we see Arendt's distinction between the social and the political as describing different ways of relating to the world and each other, in other words, that a public sphere dominated by 'the social' is, so to speak, a defective public (Pitkin, 1998, 179-182). This would also, incidentally, imply that we read Arendt's conceptual distinctions in a more Heideggerian vein as different modes of Being-together or *Miteinandersein*. In his early Aristotle-lectures (that so impressed Arendt) Heidegger stresses that the task of phenomenology is to analyze the 'how' of relating-to (*Verhalten*) as such; how the world is always revealed in a certain light and under certain aspects.[11] The *social* public thus entails a different mode of being together – and appearing to each other – than the *political* public proper. After all, action and behavior are similar activities – they both take place directly *between* humans, in the "web of human relationships" and serve to maintain these relationships.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger claims that a large portion of our lives are lived in the mode of 'the They' (*das Man*), and that this mode dominates public life. Heidegger's characterizations of the public are generally pejorative, it is a dominated by of distantiality, averageness and leveling down, idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity (cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time* §27 and §35-38).

We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as they see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as they shrink back; we find 'shocking' what they find shocking. The 'they', which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness. (Heidegger, 1962,167)

Heidegger's *das Man* is an *existential*, i.e. an inherent structure in the human way of being – but one that nevertheless can be exacerbated by societal forms. Heidegger's alternative to existing in the mode of *das Man* is to become authentic, but his notion authenticity is based on an inward turn, through confrontation with anxiety and death (at least in *Being and Time*)[12]. Heidegger's model does not offer us any positive vision of the public, but this is

exactly what we find in Arendt. Rejecting Heidegger's "romantic" turn inward, identity is fundamentally intersubjective for Arendt, and to the extent that we can talk about something like 'authenticity' in her thought, it is as a specific mode of being together.

Plurality is key to Arendt's notion of politics and serves as the "basic condition for both action and speech" (Arendt, 2005, 93, 95, and 1958, 175). In *The Human Condition* plurality is introduced as "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt, 1958, 7). This is of course trivially true, but there is more to the concept of plurality than a mere multiplicity of human beings or qualitative differentiations (diversity). Plurality is not something that is just "present at hand", but something more akin to an achievement[13] Every individual is a unique viewpoint of the world, but this unique viewpoint must be articulated, expressed and recognized by others in order to *appear as such*. The different basic activities of labor, work and action lets the world, ourselves and others appear in different ways, and while the being-together in labor and work erases individual uniqueness, speaking, acting and judging is the form of togetherness in which we appear– as Arendt frequently phrases it –"qua men" (Arendt, 1958, 176, and 212). Uniqueness can therefore only fully appear as a worldly reality in an activity – what Sophie Loidolt (2018) has called *actualized plurality* – a mode of being-with-one-another where we speak, act and judge with others as equals, that is, as a certain form of "we": "The revelatory [i.e. revealing the 'who' of somebody] quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others, and neither for nor against them – that is in sheer human togetherness". (Arendt, 1958, 180). In short: In contrast to the plurality fostered by the political public sphere, 'the social' represents a normalizing, disciplinary power, producing 'behavior' rather than 'action'.

It is decisive that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household. Instead, society expects from each of its members a certain kind of ***behavior****, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalize" its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.* (Arendt 1958, 40).

Although Arendt gives us a story (both in *The Human Condition* and *Origins of Totalitarianism*) of the origins of 'the social' (linked to modern capitalism and the Nation state) she does not provide much detail as to how conformism works, and I will here attempt

to use Moeller and D’Ambrosio’s theory of *profilicity* to suggests how conformism operates within today’s social media.

Profilicity and second order observation

Moeller and D’Ambrosio’s launched the concept ‘profilicity’ in the 2021 book *You and your profile– Identity after authenticity*. As the title implies, they see profilicity as a new figuration of selfhood that is taking over from the pre- and early modern ‘sincerity’ (based on societal functions or roles) and the modern ‘authenticity’ (based on a notion of an inner self and originality). They point out that a large part of social media is about producing images of ourselves; of our faces, bodies, activities, preferences and possessions. These images are almost always styled in particular ways and represent how we would like to be seen by others. The popularity of photo-editing apps[14] exemplifies one important aspect of profilicity; that our self-presentation on social media is not first and foremost directed at our friends and family (who know perfectly well what we look like) but to a general public and invites response in the form feedback (likes, clicks, shares, comments etc.). If our self-presentation is liked, this functions as a validation of the *persona* presented and encourages us to continue to post this type of content – what Moeller and D’Ambrosio call “social validation feedback loops” (Moeller and D’Ambrosio 2021, 30). While Heidegger’s *Eigenlichkeit* clearly belongs to the older conception of identity in terms of authenticity, *profilicity* mirrors some structural similarities with Arendt’s notion of identity, but in a somewhat twisted – and in my view – chilling manner.

According to Moeller and D’Ambrosio profilicity is how identity is constructed under the condition of pervasive ‘second-order observation’. Second-order observation means observing something *as it is observed by someone else*. In other words, it is not ”the thing itself” that is observed, but rather how it is observed by others and anonymous rating mechanisms and review processes. YouTube, Instagram or TikTok videos and Twitter accounts, are all examples of second order observation mechanisms, in that we do not only observe the video or tweet, but also how many ”likes” and comments it attracts. First- and second- order observation are intrinsically intertwined on social media; even when we observe things directly, we still tend to see them in the light of how they are being seen (Moeller and D’Ambrosio 2021,40). In learning to see in this manner, we also learn to *show* ourselves in a certain way. Social media platforms are thus, according to the authors,

essentially second-order observation platforms, where we can observe how our presentation is observed, and from this obtain clues for further self-presentation in the form profiles.

Mueller and D'Ambrosio underscores that in second order observation, validation from strangers is the most valuable and objective: In a similar manner as reviews of an Airbnb host by their family members have little legitimacy, validation from strangers is more valuable to our personal profile, than that of those close to us. (Mueller and D'Ambrosio, 2021, 28) According to the authors, second-order observation is ubiquitous in the contemporary world; we are surrounded by a myriad of anonymous ranking and assessment systems; whether we check into a hotel or look at the ranking of an academic journal, or evaluate a clothes brand, we operate in the form of second-order observation. Businesses also manufacture and market their brands through social validation feedback loops: "The profile symbiosis between employers and employees is increasingly obvious in almost every sector of the capitalist economy, including university education" (Mueller and D'Ambrosio, 2021, 30).

The weird beauty contest

Mueller and D'Ambrosio illustrate the structure of second-order observation by John Maynard Keynes' thought experiment of "the weird beauty contest", originally intended as a model to describe the functioning of financial markets.[15] In the weird beauty contest, the participants compete to guess which face will win, but the prize goes to the person whose choice corresponds to the *average* preferences of the competitors (Mueller and D'Ambrosio, 2021, 122). In other words, in order to win, you must not choose the face that you personally find prettiest, or even those that most participants genuinely think are the prettiest, rather, you must correctly anticipate "what average opinion expects the average opinion to be" (Mueller and D'Ambrosio, 2021, 123). That is, you must abstract from all first-order observation preferences, and instead estimate what faces others will judge to be considered *generally fashionable*. The actual object of observation and evaluation are thus not the faces themselves, but other people's observations and evaluations:

N*ow everybody is aware that everybody else is also observing and evaluating in the mode of second-order observation, and what people "genuinely think"— that is, what they observe in the mode of first- order observation—becomes irrelevant. The exclusive object of*

observation and evaluation are other people’s observations and evaluations. (Mueller and D’Ambrosio, 2021,123)

The Luhmann-inspired theory of ‘profilicity’ suggests that in late modernity, financial value, beauty value, moral value or personal value are all determined by second-order observation through various ranking and rating mechanisms that together constitutes what Moeller and D’Ambrosio calls the ‘general peer’, an abstract virtual public opinion which – and this is important– is *not the sum* of the real opinions of various individuals (or what they come to agree on) but what everyone *thinks* is the opinion that is generally regarded as right – *what average opinion expects the average opinion to be*. Profiles succeed through public attention and approval – through being followed, noticed, rated, ranked and liked, and since it all happens in relation to second order observation, the point is not so much (as in the Habermasian notion of public reason) to find out what is normatively binding or true, but rather to *predict* what will be seen as interesting, cool, popular or acceptable in the eyes of the virtual general peer. “What is rewarded is cleverness in assessing what is seen *to be seen* as good— and the ability to express oneself in accordance with it” (Mueller and D’Ambrosio, 2021, 28).

Our profiles are our identity, and are as all identities in need social validation. Under earlier conditions of sincerity or authenticity, this validation could come from present peers, family members or personal friends, while in the age of ‘profilicity’ identity validation is given by the abstract general peer. This, Moeller and D’Ambrosio claim, is one of the reasons why social media are so *addictive*; they satisfy a deep existential need in affirming our identity and also part of the reason why the platforms have been able to accumulate such enormous amounts of financial value. Activity on social media – the feedback loops of posting, liking and commenting –is a kind of “identity work”. Identity as profilicity is fickle, however, and extremely vulnerable to fads and fashions, and therefore in need of careful maintenance and constant polishing. Even a mere slowing down of validation (for example in the form of a declining number of “likes”) indicates devaluation, and an active and presentable social profile must therefore be continuously updated and curated. (Moeller and D’Ambrosio, 2021, 59)

Virtue-speak; curating the brand

Social media thus bears more resemblance to a marketplace than a Habermasian or Arendtian public space. As said above, Arendt links the rise of 'the social' to the entrance of economic thinking into the public, and under conditions of profilicity one's private life becomes curated and exhibited for social currency. We are encouraged and expected to exhibit our private life on social media. As part of our profiles, our *opinions* also come with a market value, and the current tendency to moralize public discourse can therefore (at least partially) be explained by the concept of profilicity. Since we present ourselves to the abstract general peer– who cannot observe what we actually *do* in real life – what we *say* becomes the most visible and significant aspect:

A profile is public. Accordingly, under conditions of profilicity, morality is […] first concerned with performance rather than with what may be hidden behind its surface. What counts is what is seen, and importantly, what is seen as being seen. The power of profiles is improved by sharing opinions and judgments. The morality of profilicity can be expressed as "political correctness," "virtue speech," or "virtue signaling," but also by violations of these, if this is what one's audience is known to prefer. Profilic morality consists in proclamations complying with a targeted public opinion. (Moeller and D'Ambrosio, 2021, 27-28).

The point is not just to be seen as virtuous, *but to be seen as being seen* as virtuous. Value lies in the display of something that is regarded as right or good, but in order to count, it must be *visible* in rankings, reviews, or comments. This, the authors claim, is the reason why moral communication in the form of 'virtue-speak' has become so crucial today (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2021, 93). It is a powerful and effective tool for achieving profilicity and is increasingly used by public figures, traditional media, businesses and institutions (like Universities) because they all have a profile to sell. Identity as profilicity is, in other words, comparable to a brand. In a similar manner as a brand can be destroyed by being associated with immoral practices, a profilic identity can be destroyed by being publicly shunned or shamed. Avoiding moral ostracization thus becomes paramount. To be shunned is a situation where others make sure to distance themselves from *any* association with – or endorsement of– the shunned; avoid citing them,"unfriend" them or have their social media accounts discontinued for example. Moeller and D'Ambrosio stress that profiles stand in a competitive relation to each other – only a few can be high profile. The traditional forms of validation belonging to sincerity and authenticity (being validated by one's immediate peers, family or friends) don't really work in profilicity: "Your family members' likes don't really

count, and the unseen profile is all but worthless. Just as in the capitalist economy, the profilicity lottery only increases the gap between those who are really successful and those who are not." (Moeller and D'Ambrosio, 2021, 111). On the other hand, everyone, including the low profiles, can be part of social validation feedback loops, since social media offers us a constant opportunity to validate others. The feeling of being one with the general peer can thus provide a sense of power in low-profile peers, a sense that they can make a difference in how something is seen (ibid. 110) but it is hard not to see this as a kind of *Ersatz* empowerment.

Competing in the profile market: "Mimetic desire" and "purity spirals"

While Moeller and D'Ambrosio present profilicity as a somewhat neutral phenomenon – simply what our identities *are* under the late modern condition of second order observation, the picture becomes somewhat darker if we look at social media through the lens of Réne Girard's theory of mimetic desire. According to Girard we desire things because others desired them first, not because of their intrinsic qualities. What we long for is therefore to possess *what others seem to want*; and on social media – likes, followers and a higher profile – and conflict is the inevitable result. Since there can be only a few winners, our relationship online becomes, according to Shullenberger (2020) "a steady grind of resentment". Schullenberger finds empirical confirmation of Girard's hypotheses in the constant tendency towards escalating conflict and rivalry in online spaces, which is only temporarily overcome by redirecting collective aggression to a surrogate victim –a scapegoat –who is then subjected to "pile-ons" or "canceled".[16] Typically, the victim is not out-group, but an in-group member who has transgressed a group norm. According to Schullenberger, it follows from the functioning of the online attention economy that participants are actually incentivized to throw the first stone:

Since users easily come together around shared objects of moral indignation, a negative post about a person who can serve as some group's scapegoat can be a predictable way to reap a good harvest of likes and followers. (Schullenberger, 2020). Mob dynamics can therefore be seen as a feature of social media platforms, not a bug.

Moeller and D'Ambrosio's analysis of what is now often called "virtue signaling" is that it is a way of inscribing our profiles into moral validation feedback loops. However, these

feedback loops can veer off into what journalist Gavin Heynes (2020) calls “purity spirals”. In a purity spiral, being seen as the ”purest” is rewarded, and holding a divergent or nuanced – i.e. “less pure”– opinions is punished, in a dynamic that inevitably leads to escalation. Heynes uses as his example an online knitting-forum, which in 2019 descended into a bitter conflict over racism. The spiral started when Nathan Taylor, a gay man living with HIV, launched a hash tag aimed at promoting diversity in knitting (#Diversknitty) apparently with the best of intentions. At first, the hash tag was a hit, spawning over 17,000 posts, but the discourse soon descended into a frenetic moral outbidding when the (predominantly white) members started competing in being *the most* anti-racist. Those who criticized bullying – or even just tried to lower the temperature were met with ”a veritable tsunami of condemnation” according to Hayes. Taylor, who came up with the hash tag in the first place, tried to calm the waters with a humorous poem (“*With genuine SOLEM-KNITTY/I beg you, stop the enmity*”) but found himself in the role of the scapegoat and accused of being a ”white supremacist”. Eventually, he suffered a nervous breakdown and ended up in hospital after an attempted suicide. What this example shows, is that the social dynamics of a purity spiral can turn even an online knitting forum into a dangerous place.

Haynes suggests that a purity spiral “occurs when a community becomes fixated on implementing a single value that has no upper limit, and no single agreed interpretation. The result is “a moral feeding frenzy” (Haynes, 2020). I will suggest, however, that the problem may not first and foremost be the lack of an agreed interpretation or ”upper limit”, but rather the lack of a common worldly object combined with the competitive social dynamics of profilicity.

The vanishing table

When moral positioning has some kind of market value, we are in a competitive situation where the main thing is *how we are seen to be seen.* In contrast, Arendt stresses that a genuine political discourse must always be about the *world* we have in common, and she reminds us that “public” has 2 different senses: a) “everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everyone and has the widest possible publicity”, and b) ”the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it” (Arendt, 1958, 50, 52). The tendency to conformism in social media and dynamics like purity spirals can from an Arendtian viewpoint be seen as the result of a social space that is public

only in the first sense. Political interaction involves a certain *distance* according to Arendt, because it consists of speech in which someone talks to somebody about something that is of interest to both, because it *is between them.* The *content* of any political debate is for her always objective and aimed at the "world of things in which men move, which physically lie between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests" (Arendt, 1958,182) and it is something over which we eventually must come to some sort of agreement if any collective action is to be undertaken. She here uses the image of a table: To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world like every in-between, relates and separates at the same time." (Arendt, 1958, 52). In order to appear to each other as a plurality of unique perspectives on the world, we need to be anchored *in* the world, we need the mediation of the common thing. Mass society, in contrast, is according to Arendt rather like a spiritual séance:

What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible. (Arendt 1958, 52-53).

My hypothesis is that the tendency of social media discourse to go off the rails is (at least partly) due to the absence of a common thing – the *res publica* if you like – the common object that can bee seen and appreciated and judged from a multiplicity of perspectives: "[…] reality is not guaranteed primarily by the 'common nature' of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object" (1958: 57).

A public thing must be something "reified" to a certain extent; institutions, material structures, laws, urban planning, architecture, artworks and infrastructure are all examples things that make up an objective in-between, that can be seen and approached from different viewpoints and allow different perspectives to emerge. To take an example: Health is an interest grounded in our *sameness* (we are all vulnerable as biological beings and we

all desire good health) but health-talk going public tends to lead to governmental micromanaging (or "nudging") and social (and competitive) moralizing. A health *institution* on the other hand, is a public thing that we have in common and can observe and discuss from various points of view. In other words, to have a common 'thing' facilitates what the Norwegian philosopher Skjervheim calls a 'triangular relation' that characterizes any genuine intersubjective dialogue. In a triangular relation, I respond to an utterance by directing my attention to the same subject matter in such a way that we share a common object as participants in the conversation (Skjervheim, 1996). The alternative relation is to register the other's utterances, infer their motives and then make the other into *my* object. When the in-between that anchors political debate disappears, the structure changes. Without the intermedium of a common thing to talk *about*, and anchor our perspectives in, we become each other's objects, so to speak, and the competitive bid for status (profilicity) sets off.

Arendt insists that political deliberation and action must always be about the *world*, not about ourselves. The widespread tendency to moralize public debates – which risks leading to purity spirals and public shaming and ostracizing – can be seen as a symptom of the abolishment of the necessary distance and connection provided by the common thing. As Arendt often notes, while politics is always about the world we share; moral considerations tend to turn towards the self, and under conditions of profilicity, this self is no longer our individual conscience or private motives – but a public profile that seeks approval by the general peer.

Profilicity as Arendt's dark mirror

I mentioned above that there are some almost uncanny structural similarities between Arendt's notion of the self and the theory of profilicity. Although she echoes Heidegger in her disdain for conformity, Arendt's notion of the self is in some respects almost the inverse of Heideggerian authenticity, in that her emphasis is on the "surface" – in the sense of 'that which appears'– rather than depth. [17] The self is relational through and through, and what is unique about us is something that manifests itself in an intersubjective space of visibility – not unlike a "profile". Our experience of reality itself is essentially mediated through others. Arendt claims that what we experience as *real* is what can be seen and heard from a multiplicity of vantage points and for a plurality of people "it is the presence of others "who

see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves" (Arendt, 1958, 50). The same holds for the theory of second order observation. Furthermore, the Arendthian public space is both competitive and cooperative – and the same is true of social media where we present our profiles for competitive validation and partake in creating 'the general peer'. Another similarity is that communication on social platforms is – like Arendtian action––something that occurs within a network of relations between speaking persons, and like action, it is both limitless and boundless. An action can only be a beginning of something if others take it on and respond to it, and since action always takes place within a 'web of relationships' the outcome of action is unpredictable in principle. Similarly, under conditions of second order observation there is no final word since new players continuously enter the scene. The fleeting character of what is fashionable somehow mirrors the unpredictability of Arendtian action: What the public opinion of the general peer finds cool today, could be obsolete tomorrow. However, the whole point of Arendtian action, the very meaning of politics[18] – freedom – is lacking since the motivation for the interaction is to "win the game" by predicting what is acceptable to the 'general peer'.

When talking about the 'who' that is revealed in action, Arendt draws on the image of the Greek *daimon* who accompanies each through life, "always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus only visible to those he encounters." (Arendt, 1958, 179-80). This identity that we cannot help but reveal in speech and action, is not under our control: "One discloses oneself without ever either knowing himself or being able to calculate beforehand whom he reveals." (Arendt, 1958,192). I personally always found this to be a somewhat comforting thought; if it is indeed true that we cannot master our self-revelation, we can also stop worrying about it. However, the notion of profilicity as *the* late modern form of identity reverses the situation: To curate a profile for validation by the general peer is precisely *the unending task of controlling others' perception*. Moeller and D'Ambrosio stresses that this is hard work– a profile does not remain valid if it is not continuously confirmed, and social media accounts thus requires constant curation and updates since they are worthless without constant validation feedback loops (Moeller and D'Ambrosio, 2021, 32-33).

To appear to each other in a public space – what Loidolt (2018) has called 'actualized plurality'– means being present together and seeing each other as equal and distinct – but under conditions of profilicity, the point is no longer to be seen, *but rather to be seen as being seen*, and the actual presence of others is no longer relevant. While the public realm

as envisioned by Arendt is thought of as empowering and fostering individuality, the quest for profilicity reverses this logic, since the general peer to which we appeal is created by abstracting from *any* particular perspective so that an average opinion *about* average opinion can emerge.

What happens to our capacity for judgment – the political kind of insight *par excellence* according to Arendt – under conditions of "second order observation? An essential part of judgment is "training one's imagination to go visiting" that is, to attempt to see the world "from the other fellow's point of view".[19] When we attempt to share our outlook –what she calls "wooing" the consent of others – we need to be able to take into account a plurality of standpoints and perspectives. What Arendt calls "common sense" is not the same as general consensus or public opinion, but the result of a comparison of perspectives and thus not something we automatically possess in virtue of being socialized, like habits or traditional values. It is not something that resides in each individual's cognitive capabilities but relates itself to the 'in-between' in the form of what Marieke Borren has called "feeling for the world" or contact with reality.[20] Common sense is a connectedness to the common world in its muliti-facetedness, as it shows itself through a plurality of perspectives. It is the basis for sound judgment as the very ground upon which we form opinions by checking our own viewpoint against others. To make up one's mind and to judge as an individual presupposes a plurality of opinions, since "no formation of opinion is ever possible where all opinions have become the same" (Arendt 2006b, 217). As Sandra Hinchman (1984) phrases it; common sense cannot emerge fully unless we also have some dissensus. In fact, Arendt claims that "[t]he reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised." (Arendt, 1958, 57). Under conditions of second order observation, however, the general peer *functions precisely as such a common measurement*, and thus also as a kind of world-alienation. Moeller and D'Ambrosio's general peer manifests itself only in large quantities by the aggregated number of clicks or citation metrics; it is a kind of *das Man* made up of statistical data. Arendt's common sense or '"feeling for the world" is part and parcel of relating to a plurality of perspectives, about which the aggregation that makes up the general peer tells us nothing at all. The effect is thus to obscure the common world: "The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective" (Arendt, 1958, 58). If we return to Keynes' weird beauty contest, the

goal of the competition was not to understand the other contestants'' perspectives, but to predict accurately what they would estimate the general opinion to be, and as such a kind of perversion of Arendtian judgment: We "win" (increase our profilicity) by distancing ourselves from our own perspective in order to accurately predict *the general opinion about the general opinion* – rather than appreciating various perspectives as the basis of our own individual judgment. In short, social media promotes *behavior* rather than action, poignantly summed up by Pitkin:

Behavior is rule-governed, obedient, conventional, uniform and status-oriented; action by contrast, is spontaneous and creative; it involves judging and possibly revising goals, norms and standards rather than accepting them as given. Behavior is routine, action unpredictable, even heroic. (Pitkin 1998, 181).

To the extent that our communicative activity on social media is geared towards increasing our profilicity it would be a perfect example of what Arendt calls the "bourgeois attitude", except that the private goal in this case is social validation rather than material interests. A public good can never, she claims, be equaled with self-interest, however "enlightened" it might be, in that it has a different temporal character; the public good belongs to the world, it and as such it outlasts the lifespan of the individual. In fact, Arendt claims, the "public good" – the concerns we share as citizens– are often antagonistic to whatever we may deem good for ourselves in our private existence. (Arendt 1977,105 and Arendt, 2003, 153). From an Arendtian perspective, the transformation of values into commodities that is implied by the theory of profilicity is therefore exceedingly dangerous, in that the conformism inherent in this search for validation would threaten our very capacity for independent thinking and judging.

The too harsh light

Arendt often uses the metaphor of darkness and light when describing the private and the public. The light of the public is, however, rather harsh, and we need the "darkness" of privacy as a hiding place to retreat to in order to act with courage in the public space. The blurring of the public and private sphere that characterizes the self-presentation on social media banalizes both our public and private lives:

A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense. (Arendt, 1958, 70-71).

When made public and cultivated for social currency, one's private life becomes a caricature of itself. Certain emotions and moral qualities are simply not fit for public display, and can not "go public" without changing character. Compassion, love and goodness for example, can only thrive in the relative darkness of the private sphere: "the demand that everybody display in public his innermost motivation, since it is actually impossible, transforms all actors into hypocrites". (Arendt, 2006b, 88).

Online communication is not isolated from "RL", and various forms of public online shaming have severe consequences for the individual subjected to it. (For some striking examples of this, see Jon Ronson (2015). According to John LeJeune the prevalence of social ostracism is a symptom of the blurring of the private and the public that is so prevalent on social media. The contemporary forms of shunning "suggests that no separation can be made between one's public persona — the identity one assumes in public when one voices political opinions that seek to persuade, and when one acts on principles he hopes others will follow — and one's private self, which has other, more basic, needs for security, comfort, and sustenance." LeJeune (2018).

According to Arendt, the only remedies we have against action's unpredictability are promises and forgiveness (cf. Arendt 1958, 237, 2005, 58-59). The act of forgiveness releases the individual from what she calls the "predicament of irreversibility" and allows us to, in some sense, undo the past and reconnect again. The theory of profilicity can therefore also shed some light on the rather *unforgiving* character of today's online culture[21]. If there seems to be little room for forgiveness, trial and error, or even changing one's mind in online communication, this is quite predicable given that – if we are to believe Moeller and D'Ambrosio – what we in fact are doing on social media, is not establishing relationships with concrete individuals, but rather a *performance* for an abstract general peer.

To speak and act in public where we disclose and expose ourselves to the gaze of strangers demands trust as well as courage (Arendt, 1994, 23). When we act politically, we send our

words and deeds into the web of human relationships, and in order to be able to do so we must have a basic trust in our fellows’ goodwill and honesty. Under the condition of second order observation, however, what is rewarded is a highly *vigilant* self-presentation. Rather like Arendt’s *parvenu* who is engaged in continuous impression management, we must be on guard against spontaneous impulses, judgments or expressions that do not conform to the general peer, since the goal is social acceptance and validation (see also Pitkin 1998, 25). It seems to me, that under these conditions, we should not be surprised if participation in the *social* public sphere of social media is more likely to lead to anxiety and depression than any form of ”public happiness”. [22]

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Endnotes

[1] In some cases, especially where the traditional public space is heavily restricted or censored, social media can indeed function as a kind of proxy public sphere. See for example Abdulla (2011).

[2] For a thorough discussion of the (in) effectiveness of social media as a tool for political change see Evgeny Morozov's *The Net Delusion: How not to liberate the world* (2011).

[3] See for example McAdam (1986) and Gladwell (2010). Interestingly, McAdam's notion of 'strong ties' can support some of Arendt's reflections on power as a social bond emerging from the binding force of mutual promising (See Bernstein 2010, 116). Social media, on the other hand, tends to create what Bratich (2012) calls 'flashpublics'– a quick mobilization of attention towards a predefined political objective, served as a pre-organized package. However, others claim that there is insufficient empirical evidence to claim that "slacktivism" *replaces* traditional activism, and that online and offline political engagement is not mutually exclusive (Christensen, 2011).

[4] See Lorenz-Spreen et. al. (2022), Haidt (2022), Thi Nguyen (2020).

[5] See for example the MIT study by Vosoughi et al. (2018), based on ten years of data on Twitter. The researchers found that false news stories were 70 % more likely to be retweeted than true stories, and that false news spread six times faster, and reached more people than true ones. Furthermore, this effect was not due to "bots" – they spread false and true news at approximately the same rate – but was rather a result of human decisions.

[6]See for example Arendt (2006a, 252-253 and Arendt 1966, 351, 474 and Arendt 1995, 67, Arendt 2003, 43).

[7] See Tversky and Kahneman (1974).

[8] Facebook's psychological experimentation in 2013 on 'emotional contagion' on nearly 700.000 users opens some rather chilling vistas regarding the power of such platforms to influence its users. (see Kramer, Guillory and Hancock, 2014).

[9] Evgeny Morozov, "Post-Truth as the Ultimate Product of Platform Capitalism". Keynote speech at the Media Meets Literacy Conference in Sarajevo, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OH6DmI4x_qU

[10] "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" published in *Harper's Magazine* July 7, 2020. https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/justice-and-vigorous-debate-2020-07-09

[11] These texts are *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles* from 1921/22 (GA 61), "Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles. Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation" from 1922, published in the *Dilthey-Jahrbuch,* Band 6/1989, *Ontologie: Hermeneutik der Faktizität* from 1923 (GA 63), *Grundbegriffe der aristotelischen Philosophie* from 1924 (GA18) and *Interpretation Platonischer Dialog (Sophistes)* from 1924-25 (GA 19).

[12]. When Heidegger in the 1930'ies turns away from the project of fundamental ontology and towards the "history of Being" he seemed to regard National Socialism as a kind of collective authenticity, where the resolute people takes the place of the resolute self in

Being and Time. For a discussion of the links between the early and "middle" Heidegger, see Granberg, 2019.

[13] See Loidolt, 2018, 221-233.

[14] The Chinese image-editing apps by Meitu, for example, produce around *six billion* photos a month. (Moeller and D'Ambrosio, 2021, 17).

[15] The beautiful faces correspond to stocks and bonds; their market value is not derived from inherent value or by what investors "genuinely thinks" about them, but by looking at how something is "seen as being seen". (Mueller and D'Ambrosio, 2021, 124).

[16] Schullenberger suggests that while an ideological opponent or out-group member can be dismissed, the "In-Group Contrarian" must be *destroyed*. Traditional societies, Girard argues, controlled mimetic rivalry in the form of sacrifice and ritualized violence, in order to maintain social unity. Schullenberger suggests that online behavior will follow the same cyclical pattern of resentment, outrage and expulsion of the scapegoat. All this, however, is good business for the platforms, which "Like a bloodthirsty god […] feeds off of sacrifice" in a perpetual loop between deviance and conformity (Schullenberger, 2020).

[17] For a more thorough discussion of the connections and differences between Arendt and Heidegger, see Granberg (2022).

[18] See Arendt (2005,108).

[19] See Arendt (2005, 18 and 2006a, 219, 237, 1992, 42-43.

[20]For a very thorough discussion of common sense, see Borren (2013).

[21] See Van Eecke (2021)

[22] See the quite damning exposure in the so-called "Facebook files" in *Wall Street Journal* which showed that Facebook's have been aware since 2018 that their platform causes psychological and social harm.