University of Dundee: PI21018 Final Essay

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Question: Hannah Arendt states that 'the space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action.' To what extent is Arendt's definition of the space of appearance defamiliarized within the internet and social media usage?

Abstract:

Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* is a fundamental text which outlines three divisions of our condition; work, labour, and action. However, Arendt's defining and unique notion of the 'space of appearance' has taken a new form in the modern age. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the reliance humanity has on technology and post-pandemic; humanity has become irreversibly accustomed to this technological reliance. Consequently, Arendt's definition of the space of appearance has assumed a new digital form; which I define as the *digital* space of appearance. By comparing Arendt's definition of the space of appearance with contemporary research on the Digital Age I aim to highlight the defamiliarization of action, speech, the web of relationships, and in turn the space of appearance as a result of chronic social media usage. By closely examining key elements of the division of action (isolation and alienation) Arendt's definitions will be compared and analogised within the context of the digital age. Arendt's notion of action provides an important framework for understanding the vast differences in human interaction, and its consequent impact, between pre and post social media. The covid-19 pandemic will be argued as a turning point in time, which signifies our unhealthy reliance on technology, specifically social media. Furthermore, the isolating dangers of social media will be discussed, in reference to Arendt, thus conveying social media's ironic propensity toward the distance it places between men; enabling a lack of emotional and meaningful connection with each other.

Throughout *The Human Condition,* Arendt emphasizes the interdependent relationship between action and speech, with 'communicative interactions sustaining the web of human relationships' and 'action being symbolic in character'.[1] The current Digital Age has produced vast developments in smartphone technologies, AI, and social networking services (SNS). The recent COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated man's dependency with his smartphone and their function has drifted enormously from their initial communicative purpose. Nearing four years since the first lockdown this shift is evident; man is irreversibly accustomed to online life. As a result, Arendt's notion of the space of appearance has been defamiliarized and assumed a new digital form. By establishing Arendt's concepts of the space of appearance, action, speech, and the web of relationships within the context of the digital age, the defamiliarization of 'men being together in speech and action' will be assessed. In turn, conveying the alienating dangers of social media and its ironic propensity toward isolation.

Arendt's notions of speech and action are fundamental to the space of appearance, which 'comes into being whenever men are together in the manner of speech and action.'[2] From the outset, Arendt emphasises plurality as action's 'condition' and in doing acknowledges that although we are all human, each individual is unique. In noting speech and action as an essential mode of understanding plurality, Arendt said that 'if men were not distinct…they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood.' [3] Therefore, both the digital and traditional space of appearance (DSA and TSA henceforth) can be considered a space for understanding the distinctness of each individual, through action and speech.

The DSA arises through the use of SNS, where users post text and videos to voice their opinions, somewhat replacing the TSA. Facebook is a notable example because users can both 'act' and 'speak' by joining various interest groups, post text and video for their 'friends' to view and interact with. In differentiating between the TSA and the DSA fundamental differences arise. Firstly, Arendt highlights that the TSA occurs only in the public realm, yet one uses SNS within the private realm and requires little contemplation. Immobile socialisation, as Barkardjeva outlines, is the 'socialisation of private experience through social organisation online.'[4] This concept confirms that authentic action cannot occur within the DSA since it occurs within the private realm amongst *users,* not *men*. In antiquity Aristotle defined speech in terms of its capacity for contemplation as opposed to mere conversation.[5] Within the DSA there is an utter lack of contemplation due to the anonymous nature of online

[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p.178-79.

[2] ibid, p.199.

[3] ibid, p.176.

[4] Maria Bakardjeva, 'Virtual Togetherness: An Everyday Life Perspective' in *Community in the Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, Inc., 2004). p.121.

[5] Arendt, p.27.

interactions, one recent example of this is the increase of nonsensical content on SNS. Platforms like Tiktok and Instagram are renowned for their 'brain rotting' content- a recent term, according to Ohni Lisle, which 'captures the condition of being terminally online, with humour and pathos.'[6] The term itself highlights the lack of contemplation and vulnerability required on SNS. Arendt characterises the vulnerability of speech by naming it a 'second birth' which is 'stimulated by the presence of other men'; yet on SNS this sense of vulnerability is void due to the presence of other users who present a curated version of themselves, not men.[7] Speech and action therefore cannot hold the same weight on SNS because of the inherent lack of accountability. Although Arendt's definition of action cannot be fulfilled within the DSA, speech holds some authenticity since sharing opinions is an integral part of SNS. Throughout the recent COVID-19 pandemic SNS enabled connection during isolation, becoming the new default method of communicating.

During the pandemic, the TSA was absent (with the exception of household members) and connecting with others on SNS was the *only* option. Joao Pedro Cachopo, observes that in the early pandemic, 'none of these technologies were new, but their use imposed itself on our lives with unprecedented intensity…confined to our homes we imagined ourselves more distant to what was close and, at the same time, closer to what was distant.' [8] Cachopo points toward the multi-faceted alienation which occurred as a result of lockdown. There was a great shift in the dependency men have on SNS and 'being amongst men' was largely facilitated through the DSA. Arendt's notions of earth and world alienation arise here, specifically the inversion of world-alienation due to SNS ability to share global information and often spread disinformation. The pandemic saw a spread of fake news and paranoiac conspiracy theories; both of which exhibit the manipulative nature of SNS and the juxtaposition of accountability and anonymity within the DSA. Hubert Dreyfus addresses this, stating that:

> '…no individual assumes responsibility for the accuracy on the Web. The information has become so anonymous that no one knows or cares where it came from. Of course, in so far as one does not take action on the information, no one really cares if it is reliable. All that matters is that everyone passes the word along by forwarding it to other users.' [9]

Dreyfus highlights the anonymity integral to SNS and alludes to the dangerous consequences of acting upon unreliable information found online. There is no guarantee for accuracy online and by

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[6] Ohni Lisle, 'If You Know What 'Brainrot' Means, You Might Already Have It', *The New York Times,* (2024) <'Brainrot' Is the New Online Affliction - The New York Times> [accessed 12 November 2023] (para.1 of 29).

[7] Arendt, pp.176-177.

[8] Joao Pedro Cachopo, *The Digital Pandemic: Imagination in Times of Isolation,* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2022) p.2

[9] Hubert Dreyfus, 'Anonymity versus Commitment: The Dangers of Education on the Internet,' in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition: An Anthology,* ed. by Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2013) pp.641-647. (p.641)

acting upon this information in the real world, one actualises it within the TSA and harmful movements based on false information can develop. The anti-vaccination movements during the pandemic are a prime example. According to The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the main claim of anti-vaxers was that 'these vaccines will change a person's DNA and have been designed to transform humans into genetically modified beings who can be monitored and controlled by unspecified external forces'.[10] This theory gained traction due to the manipulation of public opinion on SNS, for example, the Centre for Countering Digital Hate observed that Instagram saw the biggest growth area for anti-vax campaigners with 'the number of users following anti-vaccination movement profiles increasing by 1 million during the pandemic'.[11] A theory which was started by a small extremist-right wing group, as an attempt to undermine the U.S government and global institutions like the UN, spread rapidly through SNS by reaching vulnerable average citizens. During a period of intense uncertainty, these groups preyed on vulnerable citizens who were seeking answers to an unsolved question, which is how these movements often gained such traction.

Although the DSA enabled connection in times of isolation, the amount of misinformation and harmful conspiracies created uncertainty and panic. Furthermore, the lack of activities available during lockdown increased the chance to become invested in these conspiracies. This phenomenon resulted in real life consequences, most alarmingly a mistrust in the vaccination, resulting in individuals experiencing much more severe symptoms if they were to get COVID. Due to the alienating conditions of the pandemic, there was little opportunity to enter the TSA, and taking online action become a new normal since the TSA became a foreign concept. Due to this alienation from the TSA, Arendt's notions of speech and action begin to blur, and posts online assume the façade of translating to authentic action. Sherry Turkle notes that on SNS '**my actions were textual, my words made things happen**.'[12] The rise of conspiracy theories during the pandemic epitomize Turkle's sentiment; posts on SNS, as done in the private sphere, certainly have severe real-world consequences in the public sphere, thus confirming Dreyfus's thesis as legitimate. Cachoppo's hypothesis that 'the pandemic precipitated a disruption of the senses that bind us to the world'[13] resonates with Turkle and Dreyfus because the digital revolution too was a disruption of the senses, of normalcy, and the traditional means of communication between men. During the uncertainty of the pandemic, when the

[10] Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 'Anti-Vaccine Conspiracies', *Institute for Strategic Dialogue,* (2023) < Anti-Vaccine Conspiracies - ISD> [accessed 17 October 2024] (para.7)

[11] Irman Ahmed, 'The Anti-vaxx Industry: How Big Tech Powers and Profits From Vaccine Misinformation', *Centre for Countering Digital Hate,* (2020) <The Anti-Vaxx Industry — Centre for Countering Digital Hate | CCDH> [accessed 18 November 2024] (p.9)

[12] Sherry Turkle, 'Our Split Screens,' in *Community in the Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice,* ed. *by* Feenberg, Andrew, and Darin David Barney, (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, Inc., 2004) p.106.

[13] Cachoppo, p.19.

senses were disrupted, men created stability and routine through engaging in the DSA as it resembled some form of normalcy. In turn, this need to maintain contact with the world and other men exacerbated SNS usage to a new extreme. SNS (and the subsequent creation of a DSA) allowed for sustainment of human connection through non-human ways during a period of chaos.

Throughout the pandemic the term isolation was synonymous with lockdown and quarantines. Arendt discusses isolation with regard to action, specifically as being 'deprived of the capacity to act.' [14] Social media creates the illusion of social connection and was useful during the pandemic, however, post-pandemic this has become the new standard. In Arendt's TSA we *were* deprived of the traditional capacity to act, however as discussed, the DSA replaced the TSA, and one could 'act' on SNS without the vulnerability of TSA interactions. Post- pandemic, men became accustomed to this, and it has become the default method of socialising. Physical isolation denotes the circumstances of the pandemic whereas emotional isolation refers to the alienating nature of social media, as it presents a façade of human connection. Emotional isolation occurs from man's lack of actualizing reality, something inherent in the anonymity of social media. Arendt states that:

> 'The human sense of reality demands that men actualize the sheer passive givenness of their being, not in order to change it but in order to make articulate and call into full existence what otherwise they would have to suffer passively anyhow.'[15]

Human beings are not passive recipients of the world or their own existence but are compelled to engage with and articulate their being. In terms of social media there is a great juxtaposition. On one hand social media was created for men to share their experiences and connect with others. Yet the DSA has created a physical and metaphorical distance between men, facilitating emotional isolation. Actualisation requires an active engagement with the world around us, to bring ideas into consciousness, yet posting on SNS merely actualises ideas within the DSA. It is only when movements on the net spread to the TSA where these 'acts' are actualised.

Humans have an intrinsic need to fully realise and express the essence of their existence, to transform passive experience into active participation. The paradox of SNS is that they began as a platform where 'individuals meet their fellow men and women and acquire knowledge of them opening up'; yet SNS today are pits of disinformation where users struggle to differentiate between verified information and opinion.[16] The Digital Pandemic has enabled a mobile-oriented lifestyle, a great contrast to the beginning of the Digital Age where one had to log-on to a desktop to access the internet. Smartphones allow 24/7 access to the internet meaning there is no need to encounter the TSA

[14] Arendt, p.188

[15] Ibid. p.208

[16] Bakardjeva, p.141

when engaging in the DSA is so accessible and requires little contemplation. This is where emotional isolation begins; why meet a friend face-to-face when you can be in the comfort of the private realm and communicate with them through social media? Arendt notes that the TSA 'disappears not only with the dispersal of men but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves.'[17] When using SNS one cannot be fully present in the company of other men, thus authentic action decreases in the TSA in replacement of inauthentic action in the DSA. The isolating impact of SNS can be attributed toward; the lack of contemplation required when posting, the fact it occurs in the private realm, the influx of disinformation and the difficulty deciphering fact from fiction- something which has become increasingly concerning with the boom of AI technology. Most importantly, engaging primarily in the DSA prohibits authentic connection between men and even when one is engaging in the TSA, the doom of our mobile phones is always lingering.

The constant engagement with other men through the DSA has constructed the World Wide Web of relationships. Arendt's notion of the Web of Relationships has become the internet- ironically called the 'World Wide Web':

> 'The realm of human affairs consists of the web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together. The disclosure of the 'who' through speech and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt.'[18]

Since human affairs are inherently social, they are woven into a web formed by our interactions, similar to one's digital footprint. This web exists wherever men **live** together, i.e. community and shared existence are fundamental to human life. Since authentic action cannot occur on SNS no immediate consequences are felt, except from receiving digitalised forms of speech under your post. Both notions refer to the web formed by our interactions, yet one is online and the other is created within the TSA. If I were to draw a 'web' for both realms the online one would be dramatically larger because on social media we are forced to interact with much more people than one would before its invention, yet this interaction is often limited to likes and comments. The WWB of relationships exemplifies the cultural shift from using computers as a tool for information toward using them to escape reality, to get lost in another realm- in which one loses ones sense of self and becomes alienated.

[17] Arendt, p.199.

[18] Ibid, pp.183-184.

Social media is the perfect escape from reality since you could genuinely spend all day consuming various forms of media, which many resorted to during the pandemic. Turkle suggests why men feel more comfortable engaging through social media, proposing that people are:

> 'Terrified of being alone, yet afraid of intimacy, we experience widespread feelings of emptiness, of disconnection, of the unreality of self. And here the computer, a companion without emotional demands, offers a compromise. You can be a loner, but never alone. You can interact but need never feel vulnerable to another person.'[19]

Social media thrives on this dual fear by providing users a way to be constantly connected and creating a sense of community. Yet the anonymity of SNS prevents authentic vulnerability, as users present idealized versions of themselves, avoiding the messiness of real relationships. The DSA is a low stakes way to feel connected, fostering a state of constant connectivity.

SNS are inherently performative as users create an online presence to detach from their true identity, thus impacting how other users perceive them. The comparison culture which SNS foster contributes to this alienation. Instead of bringing people closer it heightens disconnection and competition, thus heightening the need for validation from SNS. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok exploit the human need for approval and recognition and increases reliance on these platforms for validation, thus continuing the addictive and toxic cycle.

Arendt's distinction between 'world' and 'earth' alienation arise on SNS. World alienation refers to alienation from man-made civilisations and political action, whereas earth alienation notes a disconnection from mother nature. In the DSA, Arendt's definition of world alienation takes many forms; it brings us closer to global-issues (with the danger of consuming fake news) and further from locality. Arendt states that world alienation is 'the atrophy of space of appearance and common sense'- stating that without the TSA common sense dies.[20] Disinformation on SNS exacerbates world alienation because although one can access information about every corner of the globe, this information is not always verified. The spread of disinformation often exploits politics, race, and religion to create discord, and as users read conflicting narratives, trust in other users and platforms diminishes. Disinformation isolates one from their community and their trusted sources, with users often left feeling lost in the abundance of (dis)information. As stated previously, 'immobile socialisation' occurs amidst the private realm; one does not have to leave the house to engage with others through social media. Earth alienation therefore inevitably occurs as men feel a sense of disconnection from nature when tethered to their devices; this manifests as a lack of awareness for

[19] Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, Twentieth anniversary ed. (Cambridge, Mass.; MIT Press, 2005) p.180.

[20] Arendt, p.209.

environmental issues and a lack of engagement with earth; both of which have personal and global health consequences.

The emergence of the DSA fundamentally defamiliarizes Arendt's traditional notion of the space of appearance. The inherent usage of SNS limits 'real world' interactions between men and the earth we inhabit. Men have forgotten how to converse with each other and the vulnerability of 'being amongst men' without access to our smartphones is daunting. The false pretence of the WWB of relationships creates a façade of connection and community as men are connected digitally not physically or emotionally. The pandemic exacerbated man's reliance on SNS for connection and as Cachoppo states, changed 'how we are, the way we live, think, desire, imagine and act.' [21] SNS have created a mode of communication where authentic action cannot occur, and where little vulnerability is required. Nothing can be actualised within the DSA unless it is acted upon in the TSA, thus the DSA ceases to contain the very notion which defines Arendt's TSA- action.

SNS are ingrained in everyday life and, from what began as a simple network to foster communication, has evolved into polarizing and manipulative place on the internet, where corporations place profit above ethics and harvest vast amounts of personal data. While it remains a powerful tool for connection, its initial intentions have been lost. To remain in touch with reality and still use social media one must remember that little on SNS is authentic, to use social media in small doses, and to prioritize real world interactions over digital ones.

[21] Cachoppo, p.31.

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Supporting Feedback

Form & Presentation (e.g. Clarity of expression, Style & Design Appropriate to Project, Quotations, References)
Form and presentation were excellent; the references were good and correct.
Structure (e.g. Introduction, Organisation, Conclusion) Structure was excellent, it followed through with the arguments presented in the introduction, with a clear conclusion to the argument.
Substance (e.g. Relevance to Question, Critical Method, Interpretation, Argument, Originality/Imagination)
There was great use of Arendt's work, plus very specific use of a variety of secondary literature on the pandemic and SNS. The work really shines insofar as it offers a new concept of the digital space of appearance and contrasts this with what is called the traditional space. This is highly original and well executed.
Overall Assessment
Excellent Essay.

(Assessment Grade from Blackboard)

