‘Enlightenment is totalitarian’: To what extent does the logic of Enlightenment persist in the algorithmic governance and digital capitalism of the 21st century?

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in wartime exile, Adorno, and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment (DoE*) critiques Enlightenment as paradoxically mythic and deceptive. Through four stages of decline from enlightenment to myth (impoverishment, fantasy, totalisation, and fragmentation) Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the Enlightenment failed to liberate humanity and its rationality has become a tool of domination, limiting individuality and autonomy, a notion integral to the current digital condition. As acknowledged by Jürgen Habermas the relationship between myth and enlightenment is complex, with enlightened thought acting as a 'counter to the authority of tradition' and as 'breaking the spell of mythical powers by means of individually acquired insights.' [1] Myth's which explain natural forces and impose order through ritual and story, are claimed to be destroyed by rationality and empiricism, however Adorno and Horkheimer not only argue that enlightenment is totalitarian but that 'myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment reverts to mythology.'[2]

I intent to examine how the logic of the *DoE* persists in the today's state of algorithmic governance and digital capitalism, where individuality is reduced to data points and autonomy erodes under the guise of connectivity. By analysing social media practices such as doomscrolling and echo chambers, and exploring the economic logic of surveillance capitalism, I argue that these systems replicate Enlightenment's totalising tendencies. Finally, drawing from the *DoE,* I consider whether technology not only dominates but also dehumanises, fostering emotional numbness and identity fragmentation.

1. THE TOTALITARIAN LOGIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Totalitarianism, a term used to describe strict dictatorships like that of Orwell's *1984,* is not traditionally associated with the Enlightenment era, which saw the advancements of natural science

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[1] Habermas, Jürgen, and Thomas Y. Levin. "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading Dialectic of Enlightenment." *New German Critique*, no. 26, 1982, pp. 13–30. *JSTOR*. [accessed 18 December 2025], p.14.

[2] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. xvi.

and a dedication to human progress. Adorno and Horkheimer however outline the enlightenment's 'very principle as corrosive rationality.' [3] As Yvonne Sherratt acknowledges, Adorno's concept of enlightenment isn't limited to the specific historical period (1660-1800) but encompasses:

> '…a very particular kind of 'culture' – one that is characterised by a certain set of aims…The principal aim of the enlightenment is the **acquisition of knowledge** which is coupled to the attainment of maturity and to a set of further aims, namely, freedom, security and peace – all of which constitute, for the enlightenment, progress.' [4]

Adorno and Horkheimer consider the enlightenment as a philosophical mode and shift in western thought, as opposed to attributing it to a specific historical period or series of events. Enlightened practice and thought, as defined by rationalism, has one aim, to 'liberate human beings from fear and install them as masters' which can be achieved through 'dispelling myths to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.' [5] However, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that this aim has been disillusioned, leading to the mythicization of enlightened practice. Resembling the previous domination the enlightenment sought to break free of.

a. THE RETURN OF MYTH

This decline from Enlightenment to myth can be understood as the 're-enchantement' of the world; where western civilisation went from reliance on a metaphysical being, to reliance upon epistemological knowledge (enlightened thought), then to the practice of enlightenment returning to resemble the mythic tendencies which dominated pre-enlightenment. Alfredo Lucero-Montano writes that the 'myths and gods, that enlightened reason left for dead and buried, are rising from their graves. They are coming back because man needs them subjectively to set ends and values that reason cannot

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[3] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* p.4

[4] Yvonne Sherratt, 'The Dialectic of Enlightenment: a contemporary reading', *Social History of Medicine* 12, no. 3 (1999), p.36, DOI: 10.1177/09526959922120333 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/09526959922120333>.

[5] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* p.2

objectively define.'[6] This notion of the return of myth, becomes intertwined with enlightenment and the two become inseparable. Lucero-Montano continues, 'in the process of Enlightenment knowledge turns into power' and nature is reduced to something man can exploit. It is a process of 'demytholisation' by exerting absolute power over nature, which Lucero-Montano cites as 'reason's *disease*.' [7]

The enlightenment is inherently alienating, its totalitarian rationalisation, and self-destructive nature possess the same totalising tendencies of myth. Essentially, instead of breaking free from domination, Enlightenment has replaced religious authority with the authority of rationality, mimicking the very system of control it sought to depart from. Adorno and Horkheimer explain that:

> '…the Enlightenment underwent **a dialectical reversal** that paradoxically transformed it into a new form of myth**, a totalitarian religion devoted solely** to an instrumental rationalism whose final aim was to create **a dehumanized society dominated by science and technology.'** [8]

They characterise the current state of 'myth' as an absolute faith in science and technology, just as man previously placed absolute faith in a suprasensory being. It's a religion dedicated to 'instrumental rationalism,' a concept coined by Max Weber which describes social action where the means are rationally chose to achieve a specific calculated end. Adorno and Horkheimer identify this 'end' as a soleless society dominated by tech. [9] The term 'corrosive rationality' used by the authors encompasses

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[6] Alfredo Lucero-Montaño, 'Horkheimer and Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*', *Philosophy Pathways* 114 (2006), p. 1, https://philarchive.org/archive/LUCHAA

[7] Lucero-Montaño, '*Horkheimer and Adorno: Dialectic of Enlightenment*' p.2.

[8] Vincenzo Ferrone and Elisabetta Tarantino, 'Horkheimer and Adorno: The Totalitarian Face of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*', in *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*, ed. by Elisabetta Tarantino (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), abstract, https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691175768.003.0005 [accessed 18 December 2025].

[9] 'Action is Zweckrational (instrumental rationality) when it is determined by expectations as to the behaviour of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations are used as 'conditions' or 'means' for the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends.'

Max Weber, *Economy, and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth, and Claus Wittich, 2 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), I, p. 24.

the very decline back to the totalitarian tendencies of pre-enlightenment mythic religion. At its core, rationalism, as Antonio Panovski outlines, posits that 'all human knowledge comes from reason, and the basic and fundamental means that we use in order to acquire knowledge and understand reality are based on higher intellectual capacities.'[10] This absolute seeking of knowledge, as the *DoE* argues, has led to a return of total domination.

Modern technology embodies key criticisms made by Adorno and Horkheimer on enlightened thought. They consider technology as fundamentally embodying the totalitarian mysticism which dominated pre-enlightenment and go as far to say that it will dehumanise society. Like the logic of instrumental rationality, technology too; (1) prioritises efficiency and control over ethical concerns, (2) reduces nature to something to be 'mastered' and exploited, with this same logic extending to the treatment of man as an object/ resource within our technical system, and (3) fundamentally follows the same degradation of enlightenment to myth, creating an illusion of freedom while reinforcing conformity.

b. THE STAGES OF DECLINE

Yvonne Sherratt identifies four stages of the decline of enlightenment into myth and its impact on man (the subject) which I intend to place within the context of today's digital condition by using 'doom-scrolling' as a symptom of Enlightenment's dialectical reversal.

1. Impoverishment

The first stage of degradation is characterised by a loss of reality as an object, where the subject loses not simply pleasure, but pleasure in *relation* to reality. Sherratt cites, 'with the technical easing of life the persistence of domination brings about a fixation of the drives by means of heavier repression.'[11]

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[10] Antonio Panovski, 'Rationalism 101: A Historical Overview', *TheCollector* (21 December 2023) https://www.thecollector.com/rationalism-historical-overview/ [accessed 18 December 2025].

[11] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment, p.35.*

Fundamentally Sherratt notes that 'the enlightenment consists of a depleted quality in pleasurable experiences' which is resonant with the concept of 'doom-scrolling.' [12]

Doomscrolling refers to compulsive scrolling on social media for extended periods of time. Its driven by escapism as opposed to meaningful engagement. In the act, one loses reality as an object, and the object becomes the virtual spaces and platforms they are using. Although 'pleasurable' in the short-term it is inherently negative as users are confronted with overloads of (often non-sensical) unverified information. This anti-pleasure-seeking practice alienates the subject to the realm of the virtual world, not reality. The 'technical easing' of life (smartphones, infinite feeds) allows users to lock into cycles of passive consumption, which doesn't seek genuine pleasure or knowledge, just compulsive escapism.

2. *Fantasy*

Sherratt observes that the stage of fantasy marks two aspects of decline:

> 'First, the pleasure-driven part of culture regresses through neglect. The subject regresses from maturity to immaturity and **pleasure becomes composed of delusional meaning**.'[13]

The maturity which accompanied enlightened thought has regressed to the immaturity which somewhat defined the pre-enlightened period; absolute devotion to a suprasensory God whose existence has no proof. With the collapse of a meaningful relation to the world, users seek 'delusive' meaning through virtual spaces.

In Enlightenment terms, maturity means agency and rationality, which has been lost. Signalling a clear regression to pre-enlightenment myth. When doom-scrolling, users seek delusive meaning in the closely curated illusions presented in feeds and algorithms. The subject can no longer relate to reality as a coherent whole, instead meaning is find outside the tangible world and in an un-checked (fantastical) virtual one.

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[12] Sherratt, *'Dialectic of Enlightenment: a contemporary reading,'* p.41.

[13] ibid, p.44.

3. Totalisation

For Sherratt, the stage of totalisation is defined by the 'instrumental abstraction of the world' where 'pleasure' predominantly derives from technology. It marks the complete decline into myth and the loss of freedom where:

> '…the subject **relates to reality only through forms of control**…the subject in dominating the external world (including other subjects) becomes **itself an object of such domination** in terms not merely of the faculty of pleasure but also **of its own independent will**.'[14]

To go a step further, today, man not only relates to reality through the dominating control of tech, but tech is the primary mode of *understanding* the world. This absolute loss of freedom and willpower is resonant again with doom-scrolling and algorithmic control, where users relate to reality through algorithmic filters, not direct experience with other men. Furthermore, the subject becomes both a consumer and a product as data is commodified and every interaction becomes a resource for optimisation. Platforms are fundamentally new mythic authorities; obscure and possessing unquestioned power.

4. Fragmentation.

The final stage of decline Sherratt observes is fragmentation, which is defined by the collapse of identity. She writes of the death of subjectivity and self-consciousness raised in *DoE:*

> 'Like Odysseus, the 'dying Subject' cries 'I am nobody,' celebrating the purported cunning of its own death. In the stage of fragmentation, the enlightenment subject degenerates to the final stage of myth, and even beyond myth, to the amorphous, to the **collapse of any kind of subjectivity at all**.' [15]

Individual agency have dissolved and with the death of the subject there 'will' is immersed into the technical system and man is fundamentally ordered by his technology. Ironically, on social media

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[14] ibid, p.48.

[15] ibid, p.51.

'users' can curate their own individual profile, which feels unique to them. However, *everyone* has a so-called unique profile which is formatted by the same templates and logic. These profiles are not just expressions of the self (albeit limited and curated expressions) but data assets. With regard to doom-scrolling, the subject too becomes 'amorphous' and is defined by reactive impulses (people liking and reposting their content). As a 'user' I often feel when I start 'doom scrolling' I cannot stop, which resonates with the lack of agency and lure of escapism doom scrolling presents. However, it only generate anti-pleasure, 'doom' to be precise. In the sea of content, 'I am nobody' and my individuality too dies; instead, I am reduced to a metric (such as a like or a repost) which will be commodified to further instruct and determine my personal algorithm.

2. TECHNOLOGY AS DOMINATING AND DEHUMANIZING

In order to reflect upon Adorno and Horkheimer's claim that we live in a 'dehumanized society dominated by science and technology' it is vital to assess the current economic state of Digital Capitalism. The Sustainability Directory define it as 'an economic system where the creation, accumulation, and control of capital are centres around digital assets, platforms, and data flows.' [16] The development of the internet, social media, and mobile devices has fundamentally transformed how businesses operate. The Sustainability Directory continued,

> 'This isn't merely about businesses using computers; it represents a structural transformation where **value is derived from the digital realm itself**…It fundamentally redefines value creation through the **pervasive influence of data and platforms**.' [17]

Instead of 'products' which are bought and sold, information is now the primary commodity and digital networks the primary means of production. The Directory point out that it's not just about digital adverts we see on Facebook, but it's about the rise of a system where 'intangible assets like

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[16] *Digital Capitalism*, *ESG Sustainability Directory* (3 December 2025), https://esg.sustainability-directory.com/term/digital-capitalism/ [accessed 18 December 2025].

[17] ibid.

algorithms and data repositories hold significant economic significance.' [18] However, Shoshana Zuboff differs in naming this economic reality, branding it as Surveillance Capitalism:

> 'Surveillance capitalists produce deeply anti-democratic asymmetries of knowledge and the power that accrues to knowledge. They know everything about us**, while their operations are designed to be unknowable to us**. They **predict our futures** and **configure our behaviour**, but for the sake of others' goals and financial gain. This power to know and modify human behaviour is unprecedented. [19]

Weber's concept of instrumental rationality is embodied in digital/ surveillance capitalism which prioritises efficiency and control over deep ethical concerns, primarily the 'unilateral claiming of private human experience' which is exactly what the *DoE* warned against through means of corrosive rationality. Both concepts of digital/ surveillance capitalism (which I will henceforth use interchangeably) note the reduction of human action to a figure and data point for big tech to exploit.

This loss of agency dehumanises man to a mere number, affirming Adorno and Horkheimer's prediction of a dehumanised society enframed by technology. However, unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, Zuboff differentiates between two concepts; totalitarianism and 'instrumentarianism' She observes that, 'totalitarianism was a political project that converged with economics to overwhelm society. Instrumentarianism is a market project that converges with the digital to achieve its own unique brand of social domination.'[20] While totalitarianism seeks political domination, instrumentarianism operates through behavioural modification to generate profit. This nuance between the two suggests that contemporary algorithmic control may not replicate political totalitarianism but introduces a new economic logic of domination.

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[18] ibid.

[19] Shoshana Zuboff, 'Facebook, Google and a Dark Age of Surveillance Capitalism', *Financial Times* (25 January 2019) https://www.ft.com/content/7fafec06-1ea2-11e9-b126-46fc3ad87c65 [accessed 18 December 2025].

[20] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019), p. 169.

This ‘social domination’ is achieved through the manipulation of content users see through prediction models. Essentially, if I like an Instagram post about coffee, the next few days I will continue to see posts about coffee, because the platform collected the ‘data’ that I like coffee, and wants to feed it more to me. However, coffee is a very inconsequential example, and this structure is dangerous as it can lead to echo-chambers.

c. ECHO CHAMBERS

As Brent Kitchens states, echo chambers are essentially a metaphor for how:

> ‘…social media algorithms combine with tendencies to interact with like-minded others to create an environment that predominantly exposes users to congenial, opinion-**reinforcing content to the exclusion of more diverse, opinion-challenging content**.’[21]

The existence of echo chambers is just a state of unquestioned reality. Users on social media rarely come across opinions which differ from their own, because they don’t frequently engage with this content, so it won’t appear on their feed. This dangerously isolates one within in their own political bubble and limits one’s ability to understand and even debate with those who have differing opinions.

Today, (speaking from personal perspective as a student journalist and social media user) there is a *huge* disparity between the left and the right, with two labels branding my generation being- the ‘ultra woke’ and the ‘far-right.’ The two groups are often hostile towards those who don’t share their opinion, as a result of echo chambers. Although with differing content and methods, both groups use social media to communicate and propagate their ideas and to recruit followers. This is just the content they put out, as a user, both groups and their respective members will be viewing content which affirms their views, leading to further polarisation. However, it is not an active avoidance or ignorance to different views but a result of the algorithmic structure which creates echo chambers.

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[21] Brent Kitchens, Steven L. Johnson, and Peter Gray, ‘Understanding Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: The Impact of Social Media on Diversification and Partisan Shifts in News Consumption,’ *MIS Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2020), pp. 1619–1649 (p. 1619), doi:10.25300/MISQ/2020/16371.

To return to the *DoE,* echo chambers too exemplify instrumental rationality since they inherently optimise engagement, not truth, reducing discourse to a means of profit. The ethical risks of echo chambers are not only the commodification of data but the fact they create bubbles where truth isn't important and mythic narratives thrive, mirroring Adorno's claim that enlightenment reverts to myth. Echo chambers are not accidental, surveillance capitalism operates, as Zuboff said, 'as a new economic order which claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, predication, and sales.' [22] It does not operate in the interest of man, but the interest of profit.

Surveillance Capitalism, which has given rise to echo chambers is a subtle form of domination and has dehumanised man due to the illusion (or delusion) of freedom. Platforms present echo chambers as 'personalisation' but it's just a form of structural coercion and algorithmic control to make profit and isn't concerned about the dangers they present. They limit actual rational debate and foster polarisation; users can no longer engage critically with issues because they aren't even aware of other perspectives and 'meaning' is sought in their carefully crafted feeds.

This emotional and moral erosion is not an isolated event but a continuation of Enlightenment's dialectical reversal: as rationality becomes instrumental, human experience is commodified, and empathy dissolves into algorithmic metrics. Sherratt's final stage of fragmentation, where subjectivity collapses, is mirrored in the emotional numbness created by social media platforms. In this sense, dehumanisation is not a separate issue but the ultimate consequence of the same corrosive rationality that underpins algorithmic governance.

Epitomising Zuboff, Christian Fuchs writes that, 'the lack of legal regulation of corporate social media platforms invites data and content commodification that does not care about whether targeted ads sell fascism or chocolate cookies.'[23]

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[22] Zuboff, , *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* p.8

[23] Christian Fuchs, 'Adorno and the Media in Digital Capitalism', in *Digital Capitalism: Media, Communication and Society*, vol. 3 (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 109.

d. DESENSITISATION = DEHUMANISATION?

Another argument for the dehumanisation of man as a result of smartphones and social media can considered through the lens of the recent murder of conservative activist, Charlie Kirk. Social media has enabled users to see violent content at the touch of a button, exposing men to horrors all across the world. Prior to social media, people were not subjected to such easy viewing of explicit horrors, people watched the news, which rarely show explicit content. It's not that there are significantly *more* awful things happening across the globe today, it is that we are consistently exposed to it.

Earlier this year, Meta issued an apology over what Dan Milano titled a 'flood of gore, violence, and dead bodies' on Instagram. [24] Milano reported that the content included: 'a man being set on fire; a man shooting a cashier at point-blank range; videos from an account called "PeopleDeadDaily;" and a pig being beaten with a wrench.' [25] This 'functional error' highlights the precarious nature to surveillance capitalism and the dangers it presents to the user, who in this case did not ask to see such content, but did against their will.

Immediately after Charlie Kirk was shot earlier this year, graphic videos of his murder were available almost instantly online. It was an easy to access video across all platforms. Kelvin Chan reported that 'two days after Kirk's death, videos were still easily found on social media, despite calls to remove them.' [26] Social media algorithms reward engagement, so because the Kirk shooting received millions of views and likes, it was put to the top of a user's feed, making users more likely to engage with it; without consideration of the impact viewing this violent content will have on not just the 'user' but the human being behind the user.

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[24] Dan Milmo, 'Meta apologises over flood of gore, violence and dead bodies on Instagram', *The Guardian* (28 February 2025) https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/feb/28/meta-apologises-over-flood-of-gore-violence-and-dead-bodies-on-instagram [accessed 18 December 2025].

[25] ibid

[26] Barbara Ortutay and Kelvin Chan, 'Widespread Availability of Graphic Charlie Kirk Shooting Video Shows Content Moderation Challenges', *AP News* (12 September 2025) https://apnews.com/article/charlie-kirk-video-violence-content-moderation-c6aa91558f5827c59aed1e82893a8ce6 [accessed 18 December 2025].

Ana Oritz observes that, ‘when violent content is consumed without boundaries or critical engagement, we risk cultivating a generation that is less responsive to human suffering and increasingly tolerant of aggression.’[27] Unlike traditional news outlets, which filter graphic visuals, social media platforms do not enforce the same controls, and their algorithms prioritise shocking and engagement-driven content. Which means that the volume and frequency of graphic content users see now is far greater than what was typical when traditional news was the main source of public information. The mediation of distance, time, and journalistic judgement prior to social media meant that news functioned as a filter to transform raw events into information which could be understood by a reader, it was essentially a moral buffer. People did know terrible violence happened, but they were not so immersed in its immediacy or brutality, as enabled by social media.

The Kirk case is a recent example of this very phenomenon which is desensitising man to violence and in the process dehumanising men. Pain is normalised on social media, with the constant horrors presented, suffering becomes the normal, with research finding it has even desensitised us to empathy. Maria Tavares’s study concluded that ‘platforms engender widespread harassment that particularly seems to affect minors, increasing suicidality’ and links a lack of empathy with online interactions. [28]

This dehumanisation is particularly concerning for younger generations who cannot comprehend a world without social media. With the desensitisation of empathy, gradual emotional numbness, and little safeguards in place by platforms, young people will become increasingly desensitised to violence and progress through the stages which Sherratt outlined, ending up with a loss of identity and fragmented.

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[27] Ana Ortiz, ‘Screens of Desensitization: How Media Numbs Our Society’, *The Minaret Online* (27 April 2025) https://theminaretonline.org/2025/04/27/screens-of-desensitization-how-media-numbs-our-society/ [accessed 18 December 2025].

[28] Maria Tavares and Ben Rein, ‘The Virtual Disengagement Hypothesis: A Neurophysiological Framework for Reduced Empathy on Social Media’, *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioural Neuroscience* **24**, no. 6 (2024), pp. 965–971 (p. 969), doi:10.3758/s13415-024-01212-w.

On TikTok, a user can go from watching Charlie Kirk's murder to somebody doing a day in the life video. It is absolutely banal.

Users (men) are passive witnesses who will continue scrolling after viewing horrific content. Furthermore, the murder victim, Kirk, and the suffering of his friends and family is commodified and treated as a content that generates attention, and subsequently wealth, stripping the event of its genuine horror. 'Users' have fundamentally been dehumanised thanks to the toxic algorithmic structure. There is no sense of morality or respect, just a need to commodify human behaviour and generate profit (from a corporate perspective) and users are emotionally numb to viewing this content because they see so much of it. Suffering and violence viewed online is void of any meaning, without context or reflection, it ceases to carry and moral weight and becomes just another visual stimulus.

While I don't believe man is entirely dehumanized, the emotional numbness induced by witnessing horrors online signals a shift whereby the 'man' and the 'user' increasingly disparage. This numbness does not equate to the visceral experience of real-life violence, yet it reflects Sherratt's fragmentation stage, were subjectivity collapses into algorithmic metrics.

CONCLUSION

The logic of Enlightenment presented by Adorno and Horkheimer, far from disappearing, persists in the algorithmic structures which dominate the virtual world. The Digital Revolution's promise of liberation has undergone a dialectical reversal. What began as a mode of liberation to connect men with like-minded groups and seek knowledge, has come to resemble the same (through instrumental rationality) system of domination the *DoE* outlined post-Enlightenment. Algorithmic governance and surveillance capitalism are systems which commodify human experience and reduces individuality to calculable metrics with little regard for ethics.

Echo chambers, predictive algorithms, and the illusion of personalization erode autonomy while reinforcing conformity. As Adorno and Horkheimer thought, rationality has become corrosive, and Sherratt's stages of decline culminate in fragmentation. I would go so far to argue that there is little left which can be deemed 'rational' on social media platforms. The only 'rational' area is the moral

rationalisation Big Tech companies say to themselves to not feel guilty about the little safeguards in place on their platforms. Whether this condition qualifies as ‘totalitarian’ or is a novel form of domination is a question which demands further philosophical inquiry.

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