

*Digital Vertigo:*  
*How Today's Online Social Revolution is*  
*Dividing, Diminishing and Disorienting Us*  
Andrew Keen

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Reviewed by Chi Ling Chan, Stanford University

Behold, the crystal palace in the age of great exhibitionism: here, everything is transparent upon itself, lined by never-ending mirrors that adore the narcissistic you, the self-styled celebrity whose existence depends on updates and tweets. Here, privacy is (really) dead and you are trapped in hyper-visibility ruled by a digital aristocrazia who profit from your individuality. You are watched not by Big Brother, but rather by countless Small Brothers whose surreptitious presence lies beneath, illuminating screens of the gadgets that never leave you. You live in a universal digital dorm room, a panopticon in which everyone is a cube both watching and being watched by every other cube. You are part of a counterculture everybody else is part of, naked to the shapeless crowd with whom you conform. There are no secrets to be had and you have no right to be forgotten. Now begins the dizzying descent into the digital vertigo.

This might read like science fiction with strong Orwellian brushstrokes, but it really is not far removed from today's reality. In *Digital Vertigo: How Today's Online Social Revolution is Dividing, Diminishing, and Disorienting Us*, Andrew Keen presents a similar hyperbolic version of reality enmeshed in Web 3.0. In some ways, it is the world we already live in: a hyper-connected world in which individuals are nodes of an unimaginably huge network, where every new online start-up—from commerce to communications to entertainment—is going “social”; where Facebook and Twitter are a defining aspect of life. Modern society is already in a social revolution, and as all revolutions go, no one knows how it will end.

Keen provides a sobering view of where the social media age is heading. By 2020, 50 billion intelligent networked devices will be in circulation. Globally stored data will grow by 4300% from 2009, with levels reaching 35 zebibyte: that's an emerald sea of 35,000,000,000,000,000,000 bytes. By the middle of this century, every single human being on planet is likely to be connected. With Facebook's members investing over 700 billion minutes of their time per month on the network and over 50 million on Twitter every day, online

social media is fast becoming the collective confessional novel of which all of us are authors.

“The analogue age of the great exhibition,” Keen asserts, “is now being replaced by the digital age of great exhibitionism” (145). Whether or not one agrees with such a depiction, the seemingly inevitable social revolution poses non-trivial questions: what does it mean to be living in a hyper-connected world where the lines between public and private are continually being redrawn? How is this hyperconnectivity changing the way humans interact with others and define themselves? Does radical sharing, openness, and personal transparency make humans happier or more lonely and divided? Amidst the sea of hype about social media and its unstoppable ascent, Keen’s book is a rare contrarian voice that takes a step back to examine some of the most tacit assumptions behind the social revolution.

“Privacy is dead. Get over it,” proclaimed Mark Zuckerberg in a TechCrunch Interview in 2010 as he made the controversial decision to change the privacy settings of Facebook’s 350 million users. The implicit assumption of many technologists who are changing the online ecosystem and architecture to reflect the new social dial tone for the 21st century is this: humans, by nature, are social animals, and social media is bringing humans closer to fulfilling their lives by eliminating loneliness. Keen is much less sanguine. For him, the hypervisibility and hyperconnectivity of a network society of auto-icons creates a “transparent love-in, an orgy of over-sharing, an endless digital Summer of Love” that, like the San Francisco 1967 bohemian revolution, will end in disillusionment (25). Taking a departure from the Aristotelian view of the social human, he defends privacy, autonomy and solitude as an important part of human existence. What individuals do not share is as important as what they do share.

At the heart of this public-private debate are two competing visions. The first accepts Bentham’s utilitarian inspection house in which individuals are fully transparent, disciplined, and made efficient by the knowledge that they are being watched. This is in line with the vision held by Zuckerberg, who apparently believes that the only reason anyone would care about privacy is that they are looking to hide something; otherwise, “going social” brings about the greatest happiness possible. Keen rejects this vision and takes side with J.S Mill’s vision of liberty being grounded in individual autonomy. “Men are not sheep,” Keen reminds us, “. . .our uniqueness as a species lies in our ability to stand apart from the crowd, to disentangle ourselves from society, to be let alone and to be able to think and act for ourselves” (193). Web 3.0, with its plethora of social media, diminishes individuals by entrapping them in a hive mind where groupthink leads to the cult of the amateur and an amnesia of the self.

An obvious, perhaps instinctive, response to this dichotomy is that society is on neither side of this spectrum, and that Keen is in fact

exaggerating by pitting two logical extremes against each other. The hyper-connected individual who is committed to the social revolution might retort, “Well I don’t share everything on the web”, while technologists would protest, “But you do have a choice! No one is forcing you to participate.” Both would have missed the point. Keen’s gripe is not with the present observable impact of social media, but with what it promises to do, as well as the assumptions held by technology utopians that a radically transparent 21st century will help society realize authentic identities on the Internet. In an Internet culture that is public-by-default, private-through-effort, society generates massive amounts of personal data and leaves unintentional digital footprints. Alas, choice might well be an illusion masked by an artificial sense of control. Furthermore, do humans really have a choice to not participate in the use of social media when not being on LinkedIn is detrimental for job searches and when Facebook is fast becoming the unspoken new admissions test for college? Design decisions of the online social architecture fundamentally shape people’s behavior, yielding rules that once frozen into place through a process Jaron Lanier calls “lock-in”, are hard to reverse.

That is why Keen’s book, despite its melodramatic science-fiction patina, merits serious reflection. It forces its reader to reassess the future that technologist optimists and social utopians alike are promising with their dizzying array of social-[you name it]. In observing the Internet and the present social revolution from a fifty-thousand foot view, Keen tempers optimism by demonstrating how humans might be on a declension into a “participatory culture” that divides more than it unites, a digital love-in of default publicness that shines an unwanted transparency upon our lives. For some, like Robert Scoble who has become a voyeuristic inmate of a digital prison, the future is already here. For others—and thankfully that is for most—this book is a timely reminder to stop and think before fully committing to the social revolution. Today's creepy can easily become tomorrow's necessity if we take privacy, choice and autonomy for granted.