

The Fluidity of Values in the Digital Age: Platform Content and the Problem of Triviality Between the Challenges of Digital Reality and Social Responsibility

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Abstract:

The challenges imposed by technological developments do not end with their profound effects on the structure of human civilization, as they have reshaped relationships and spaces, which requires diverse responses capable of covering the various dimensions of this phenomenon. The expansion of digital content is considered one of the most prominent features of this technological surge, especially in its communicative dimension, given the values and moral implications whether negative or positive that this content carries.

Zygmunt Bauman believes that consumption has gone beyond the idea of material goods to include the consumption of emotions, human relationships, and communication technologies, in a way that has greatly affected the meanings of life, love, and morality. This has led to a liquidity of fear under the pressure of consumption and anxiety about what the future holds, producing a moral disorder in which evil has become justified even by the state.

An observer of the content circulating across various virtual platforms cannot fail to notice the dominance of trivial content, in contrast to profound content that seeks to address the issues faced by the contemporary human being. Trivial content gains popularity and interaction that turn it into a trending topic across different circles, and its creator becomes an “influencer” according to new classifications. This fame turns into a marketing platform for ideas, services, and goods targeting followers. Just as this content is used for commercial promotion, it also works to inject societal perception with values and ideas through repetition, frequency, and boldness that go beyond the limits of norms and values.

Based on the above, this paper seeks to identify the challenges faced by society and the contemporary individual, and to what extent the value and moral system of our societies can confront the value saturation carried by the dominant content on electronic platforms. It also examines the redefinition of the concept of privacy and social norms, the erosion of the role model, and the fragility of human relationships. This is approached through the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman in his works on liquidity, in which he addressed the challenges imposed by postmodernity on the contemporary individual, most notably liquid ethics and the transformations of value and moral systems.

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Introduction:

Moral values are those ideals, principles, and norms that are recognized and that regulate human relationships, defining the boundaries between good and evil, lawful and unlawful, and what is

considered acceptable or reprehensible. They derive their sources from religion, customs, and the traditions of peoples and societies. They represent a form of societal immunity that regulates relationships among individuals, ensuring interaction within a framework that prevents injustice. Nations strive to sustain and preserve these values by instilling them in younger generations through educational spaces such as schools and the family.

Throughout history, these values have represented a societal safety valve against social transformations and the influence of incoming ideas on the stability of the social structure, as well as on the position of the family, the mosque, and the school, and the redefinition of rights and relationships. These moral systems have experienced disruptions manifested in the growth of indicators of social change, the decline of family relationships, the transformation of concepts of good and evil, and the weakening of the authority of the group and its norms.

These transformations have been due to several factors, including economic changes and the cultural transformations that followed them, accompanied by a technological boom loaded with new ideas and values that are being promoted. However, the contemporary stage, which has witnessed a massive digital explosion reflected in social media and digital platforms, represents a critical phase due to the fluidity of ideas and values that know no boundaries, as well as the speed of dissemination and the scope of influence provided by these platforms.

These effects occur in the context of a decline in human values, the growth of ideas of consumption and profit, the transformation of the concept of role models, and the redefinition of privacy, in addition to the pressure exerted on the institutions of the family, the mosque, and the school due to the influx of external ideas. There is no doubt that these platforms have always reflected the reality of moral values in real societies; however, they have also amplified these negative phenomena and have worked more rapidly and extensively to contaminate the value system.

Based on the above, this paper seeks to review and examine the value-based impacts produced by these platforms through the content they carry, and the meanings they include that have moral and ethical implications. This is done by addressing certain indicators, including individualism, privacy, and the role of profit in driving trivial content, in addition to the impact of these platforms in promoting hate speech. This stems from the following problem: How has digital content on social platforms affected the reality of the moral system?

1/ The decline of the sanctity of the group in favor of the dominance of individualism:

Individualism has been one of the most prominent features of the modern and postmodern era, as it represents the dominance of individual values over the group, despite the responsibilities and values

that govern the relationship with the collective. An observer of modern societies notices the growing tendency toward individualism with the formation of industrial societies, where the industrial revolution was associated with the migration of many individuals to work in factories away from their families. These individuals had to manage their livelihoods and lives on their own. Soon after, philosophical perspectives emerged that gave individualism an attractive character, especially in light of the human struggle with frameworks, ideas, and philosophies that shaped and controlled behavior¹.

Individualism is a tendency or behavior that emphasizes the personal characteristics of the individual, as well as their specific traits and distinctions, in contrast to what is collective, general, and shared. This means that individualism affirms what is private, personal, and unique. Ultimately, according to the concept of individualism, the individual is a human being who possesses internal unity and functions as an integrated system, with a particular autonomy within the environment to which they belong.² Thus, the individual is not in great need of those human bonds that burden and constrain them with a vast set of values and ideas that they perceive as limiting their freedom, and often their pleasures, and even imposing obligations they do not need.

It is noted here that individualism, as a moral value and as an orientation opposed to the group, was an ethical response to economic transformations. The means of production and economic changes have left their value-based impact on human relationships. The values of individualism may find their roots in capitalist thought, where Adam Smith considers that “the welfare of society is achieved when each individual seeks to attain their own interest.”³

Accordingly, the social and value-based impact of the means of production and their role in reinforcing the values of individualism and independence from the group is evident, despite the values and responsibilities that this relationship imposes on the individual within it. With technological development, economic expansion, and the digital revolution, social media platforms have emerged not only as means of communication, but also as tools for wealth creation and for shaping ideas and values.

Individualism in its modern sense is a philosophy that views the individual as the only reality and adopts them as the principle of all evaluation. The individual is considered independently of any social or cultural context. In contrast, collectivism expresses society as based on the community itself. Individualism presents its values independently of society as it exists, and therefore does not recognize any independent existential status for societies, peoples, cultures, or nations. These entities, from its perspective, are nothing more than aggregates of individual atoms, which alone possess value⁴.

Thus, the individual imbued with individualistic ideas believes that they do not need the group to manage their affairs, nor do they need it to satisfy psychological needs, especially since the notion of belonging has shifted, for them, from the group to the individual self around which they are centered.

Abdelwahab El-Messiri emphasizes that the greater the sense of power an individual possesses, the more they tend toward individualism and independence. Technology, despite its immense advantages, has granted humans an overwhelming sense of power, capability, and achievement, thereby deepening individualism. Within the family, individuals now live in isolation from one another under the same roof due to reliance on communication technologies. People no longer gather around the television, which once allowed a degree of interaction; instead, each person tends toward isolation in their own room, and the “mobile phone” has become the sole companion. It has even come to replace communication with others, which indicates that human relationships are moving toward disintegration, especially with the collapse of family values and their importance to its members.⁵ This reality, interacting with the outcomes of the technological revolution, has contributed to strengthening social isolation and the withdrawal of individuals away from their social environment, in favor of interaction with a virtual space that frees them from many responsibilities and values. This reality leads them to ignore family, friends, and society, thereby changing the source of value, and consequently the source of good and evil, or the judgment of behavior, with serious social and psychological consequences for both the individual and society as a whole.

Continuous exposure to intellectual saturation resulting from the massive consumption of digital content also contributes to a shift in the concept of role models and the source of values, and works to redefine success, away from the constraints of values imposed by real-world space. Content creators appear as successful role models who present their successful experiences, and they are now known as influencers, having an impact on a wide audience, which they exploit through promotional advertising of consumer goods, ideas, and values.

It is observed that the content circulating on digital platforms radically redefines the concept of privacy, as the boundaries between the private and the public almost disappear. Privacy is promoted as consumable content, attracting massive views that generate enormous profits for its creators, pushing them to share more of their daily private lives with audiences of different ages and social classes. Although this act may be individual and detached from all moral values, through repetition and widespread dissemination it redefines privacy for many and encourages turning it into a source of profit, even at the expense of societal values. These values, although publicly condemning such practices, are nevertheless consumed individually on personal devices.

Bauman describes the contemporary human in his book *Liquid Love* as a person without bonds. Accordingly, being without bonds means being without value-based obligations that govern their relationships with their surroundings, their social relations, and their perception of themselves and life. Therefore, it becomes necessary to resist the dominance of digital technology in particular, as it threatens human relationships due to the forms of individualism it produces. The younger generations are drawn into a form of voluntary subjugation and alienation, which later results in a state of intellectual and cultural emptiness, producing a generation of youth that is hollow, distracted by the pleasures and superficialities of life.⁶ Their adherence to the values of the moral system declines this system which represents a form of societal immunity and an essential pillar of social security through preserving identity and regulating relationships that are not governed by law alone.

2/ Consumption values and the economy of triviality:

The value of profit and the pursuit of success represent a central value in individuals' lives, driving them to strive and work, and to endure much in order to achieve profit and self-realization. Contemporary capitalism has heavily invested in this value and has sought to make it the driving force that motivates the consumer and the modern individual, in order to stimulate production and generate profits. It has also employed social media through the emergence of what are termed influencers, in addition to exploiting these platforms for promotion, marketing, and reinforcing the idea of consumption.

Alain Deneault states in his book *Mediocracy*: "Put your complex books aside... do not be proud, nor spiritual, nor even comfortable... times have changed; there is no longer a storming of the Bastille nor anything comparable to the Reichstag fire, and the Russian cruiser 'Aurora' has not fired a single shot toward Japan. Nevertheless, the attack has been successfully carried out: the mediocre have taken power."⁷ This meaning-laden text summarizes the idea of a shift in power and the source of influence over the masses, as platforms and their influencers through content dominated by superficiality have become the defining feature in terms of influence and symbolism. Behind this scene lies a capitalist dynamic where various interests converge.

Who governs whom? This is the question posed by Zygmunt Bauman, which he explores across two worlds: a real world that we live in, and a virtual world that we live through. The Polish sociologist does not see the virtual world as merely overwhelming our lives and competing with the old real world; rather, he sees that it has replaced it and become central to our perceptions and pursuits in many cases. In every event, one must participate, must appear, must speak, because one's existence as previously mentioned has come to be determined by the extent of their presence on social media, and this sense of existence diminishes the more one disappears and ceases to display themselves.⁸

Among the most prominent concepts/keys developed and employed by scholars to understand the transformations that have occurred in the hierarchy of values, as well as in behaviors and practices across various aspects of life in contemporary societies, are the concepts of “liquid modernity” and the “system of mediocrity.” The latter refers to a social system in which the dominant class is that of mediocre individuals, or in which mediocrity and inferiority are rewarded instead of seriousness and quality. Liquidity and mediocrity have become the very foundation of the social system, which is structured through them, while they in turn organize it and render it effective and authoritative.

The system of mediocrity (*La médiocratie*), once conceptualized, has come to “establish a context in which what is ordinary is no longer merely a neutral synthesis that allows us to grasp the nature of things, but rather becomes the standard to which we are compelled to submit.” Corruption, the commodification of academic knowledge, purely commercial practices, low-quality art, the standardization of work and its depletion of creative content, etc.⁹ This reality is produced by the interaction between digital technology and trivial content, and it derives its strength from the fact that it has become a source of wealth. Triviality has become a mine, and the trivial have become pioneers and influencers. Through repetition and saturation, it has become possible to shape thought, influence relationships, and carve the collective mind.

Capitalism has entered the term and concept of “influencers,” changing its meaning entirely. The functional and practical connotation of the term has become different from before, transforming the word from a description into a profession. Thus, the capitalist lexicon has provided a new definition of the word “influencer,” defining it as “collaborating with brands and influencing others to encourage them to purchase products.” It appears that capitalism has succeeded in spreading this concept, as the old standards and notions of influence have become a thing of the past. Today, we are faced with a new concept whose capital is linked to appearance and fundamentally based on image, view counts, and number of followers. This is what dominates and thrives in influencer capitalism, which has become a vast industry generating billions of dollars¹⁰.

The spread of social media has led to increased value fragmentation and mental distraction among most users of these platforms, causing people to spend long periods consuming superficial and trivial content that is incapable of producing an effective culture with human dimensions, nor of developing their cognitive skills. Anyone wishing to verify this can observe the content of most social media platforms and digital channels to see how frivolity has become a dominant force influencing our lives, and how compounded ignorance and complete blindness have come to lead what remains of rational minds.¹¹

Today, we stand before new transformations marked by the absence of the true meaning of things, and the emergence of a superficial and immediate “meaning” of the world around us. These transformations are also marked by the decline of thinking about major issues and its confinement to trivial topics, as if we are facing a human being who avoids the hardship of serious thinking and seeks easily digestible matters, like fast food that floods markets today and whose demand continues to increase despite its lack of nutritional value. It satisfies hunger for a short period and brings fleeting and superficial pleasure. We are indeed facing a frightening fragility and a thick shell that is forming unnoticed, deciding the battle in favor of triviality and making this era unquestionably an era of triviality¹².

What makes this reality effective is the idea of profit and the transformation of influencers into models that showcase their consumption patterns and lifestyles, by investing in the influence of their content on audiences and exploiting it for promotional and advertising purposes of products, ideas, values, goods, and services. Thus, triviality has become profitable, and through funding and capitalist utilization, it has gained financial support that allows it to compete with values, ideals, and social norms, and to achieve a stronger influence.

3/ The obsession with trends and influencer audiences: toward a transformation in the symbolism of role models and the dominance of social comparisons:

The concept of upbringing and education, with all the ideas, values, and ideals it carries, is based on the idea of role models. Through their behaviors and ideas, role models establish values, concepts, and practices merely through imitation and following. Human beings rarely detach themselves from the idea of a role model, whether directly or indirectly, through imitation, which itself carries behavioral and value-based meanings.

Many ideas, values, and behaviors are transmitted to others through role models. By nature, humans tend toward imitation and emulation, especially in the early stages of life. Specialists state that 70% of the skills and knowledge acquired by a child are gained through imitation and emulation. From this, we realize the importance of a positive role model and the danger of a negative one. The current state of moral decline in our society indicates that the disappearance of role models is one of its main causes.¹³

This society, as Guy Debord observed, has replaced being with appearing, because no one in this context cares about your existence unless you are on the screen or in the display window. In other words, many people have come to measure their existence, their role in life, and their success in work, relationships, marriage, or in raising their children by the number of times they appear, and by the visibility of their photos or posts on social media, as well as the number of likes they receive from

their followers. Therefore, they tend to follow any emerging trend, and you find them present in every “trend,” expressing an opinion and engaging in discussion.¹⁴

Thus, these platforms have become the source of value and the driver of behavior, rather than the moral and value system as an intellectual reference that defines the framework of human relationships. What matters is not how ethical the trend is or the values it carries, but rather participation in it.

It is notably observed, according to studies, that young people who use social media intensively tend to have greater concerns about body image. This influence is particularly increasing among youth, especially among women, in light of exposure to various social and cultural factors such as appearance comparisons, living standards, and social exclusion, which result in disorders and significant psychological effects¹⁵.

Studies indicate that adolescents spend, on average, more than 7 hours per day watching videos or using social media platforms, and that exposure to this type of content may reinforce similar behaviors at rates higher than parents realize. Research also shows that adolescents’ exposure to discrimination and hate online predicts increased anxiety and symptoms of depression.¹⁶ Accordingly, social media reinforces the idea of comparison, especially among girls, particularly with regard to appearance-related content. Research indicates that “individuals’ use of social media to compare their bodies or appearance with those of others is associated with symptoms of depression and the development of a negative self-image, especially among girls.”¹⁷ This is because a model of appearance, body, clothing, and lifestyle has emerged, which followers are expected to consume in order to feel satisfied and to evaluate themselves. Accordingly, satisfaction as a feeling and self-evaluation as a value have become externally sourced.

Following and interacting with influencers may lead to believing the false meanings they convey, and to interpreting life and reality through the illusion of influencer screens, while comparing this illusion to the original reality one lives. This constitutes the core of the problem in this phenomenon—the dominance of illusion over human awareness and the loss of real meanings in favor of fabricated ones. Through the promotion of false meanings, an illusory reality is constructed based on mechanisms that falsify meanings and emotions instead of reflecting truth. This places the follower in a cycle of comparison, potentially leading to feelings of inadequacy and inability, as they cannot act like influencers. Consequently, they may experience dissatisfaction and perceive their own life and lifestyle as dull and inferior compared to the seemingly happy lives of influencers.¹⁸

The follower becomes trapped in this psychological cycle centered on consumption, due to the gap between the reality they live and the split between what they consume in the virtual world and the

constraints of real society. This leads them into the dilemma of social comparison, which results in psychological crises and discontent that are reflected behaviorally and in terms of values, affecting both the individual and their surroundings.

4/ Hate speech through media... the interaction of technology and values of evil:

According to a UNESCO working document, hate speech on the internet does not differ in essence from hate speech outside the digital space. However, it differs in the nature of interactions when it occurs, as well as in the use and spread of specific terms, accusations, and conspiracy theories that can escalate and reach their peak before quickly fading. Messages inciting hatred can spread within a very short period, sometimes not exceeding minutes.¹⁹ These media have provided enormous power to the idea of hate and rumor, along with their negative effects, through a sphere of influence that transcends geography and crosses social classes and segments, and most importantly through the speed of dissemination via sharing, circulation, and interaction, which grants them a massive capacity for influence.

Digital media has represented a major breakthrough in the field of social communication, by providing means that facilitate interaction among audiences and allow citizens to participate in news production and in shaping public opinion, away from censorship. The platforms of new media, with their diversity and different features, have offered an opportunity to reflect social reality with all its contradictions and concerns, which have moved from tangible reality to the virtual community. Social media has thus become an important channel for expressing opinions and reflecting social interactions.

The spiral of silence theory, developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, monitors the effects of media on society. It considers the formation of public opinion as a dynamic process influenced by psychological, social, cultural, and political factors, with media playing a central role in shaping the dominant trend through several variables, including:²⁰

- Cumulative effect through repetition: similar and repeated messages influence the recipient's mind over the long term.
- Comprehensiveness: technological media surround the individual everywhere, producing effects from which it is difficult to escape.

The cultivation theory also assumes that cumulative exposure to media leads to a form of incidental learning that enables the process of cultural cultivation, which gradually becomes the basis of mental images and values acquired about the real world. This process is continuous and dynamic, involving interaction between messages and contexts. Accordingly, frequent exposure to digital content leads

the recipient or viewer to acquire a set of meanings, beliefs, ideas, and symbolic images that form for them a symbolic reality different from the actual reality of their social environment.²¹

Social networks have provided a powerful space for symbolic violence, by offering a space that enables the reproduction of all forms of violent discourse and their practice against others,²² Here lies the danger of new media platforms, stemming from the space they provide for interaction and engagement with various posts, as well as the broad range of targeted audiences and the rapid circulation of information. This makes the value content of electronic posts along with what they may carry in terms of hate speech, bullying, racism, etc. reach large segments quickly, with deeper consequences.

Max Fisher, the American journalist and author of *The Chaos Machine*, argues that social media platforms steer users toward adopting extreme views, and in many cases toward committing extreme acts as well. Through his observation of the spread of hate speech in many regions of the world since 2020, and its later transformation into acts of violence, Fisher noted that the concerned platforms refused to intervene to address this phenomenon and combat such discourse, under the pretext that intervention would conflict with freedom of expression. However, reality indicates that they refrained from intervening in order to preserve the profits they generate. This situation suggests a cultural shift toward a world in which people are polarized not based on beliefs grounded in facts, but on misinformation and the stimulation of anger and fear.²³

Just as digital media have provided a fertile space for the spread of hate speech, artificial intelligence and the technological developments accompanying it present humanity with an urgent ethical question that arises with every technological breakthrough. This is especially true given the alarming capabilities of these technologies and the harmful ways in which they can be used against individuals and societies. They may undermine the concept of truth, contribute to the proliferation of fake news, and institutionalize falsehood, in addition to the psychological and societal harm they cause.

Conclusion:

Technology has represented a form of human salvation in many of its aspects, through the knowledge advancements it has provided to human civilization, facilitating life and overcoming many challenges. However, like any human product, it carries another side and additional dimensions that reflect human imperfection and express both good and evil in every practice.

Similarly, social media platforms have provided interactive spaces that fostered knowledge and cultural exchange, facilitated communication and the circulation of news, and accelerated the spread of information. Yet, they have also brought cognitive, value-based, and ethical challenges that grow

increasingly dominant, reshaping societies and behaviors, and competing with traditional socialization institutions due to the fluid, comprehensive, and repetitive nature of content, which works through subtle and influential modeling over the long term.

This reality cannot be confronted through withdrawal or isolation, as nature does not tolerate a vacuum. Rather, it must be addressed through competition by creating purposeful, value-driven, and ethical content, employing algorithmic knowledge, and redirecting capitalist interests to promote meaningful content by making it trending and attracting a growing audience.

The lived reality demonstrates that the ethical responsibilities of the family and other socialization institutions have increased in burden and have become an urgent necessity at both the individual and societal levels. These responsibilities can be considered one of the fronts of social security, especially in light of moral fluidity that threatens the dominance of individualism and the dilemmas of social transformations.

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