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On NPCs and internet addicts

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Caught in the loops of digital agency panic: On NPCs and internet addicts

 
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Abstract

This paper seeks to recontextualise and update Timothy Melley's concept of 'agency panic' to think about current discourses around online media influence and addiction. According to Melley, agency panic concerns a set of anxieties linked to the diminished sense of agency, which he sees as escalating after the Second World War. Agency panic is, for him, rooted in the counterfactual expectation of full autonomy, a fantasy that is constantly undermined by the growing influence of global networks of communication and capital. In our paper, we examine how an even more networked and distributed sense of agency panic manifests today by engaging with two different figures of contemporary digital culture: the non-playable character (NPC) and the internet addict. First, we look at how, in online conspiracy discourse, the NPC is the product of a process of *othering* whereby the conspiratorial subject externalises its own sense of compromised agency in digital environments, allowing it to sustain the fantasy of its own autonomy and independence from these environments. From there, we examine different discourses of addiction linked to online cultures as manifestations of digital agency panic. Through the language of addiction, and by promoting the ideal of autonomy as individual self-control, these discourses stigmatise and pathologise users' various dependencies and interrelations with digital devices and services. Building on our analysis of NPC and addiction discourses, we then suggest that the panic-ridden fantasy of the liberal sovereign subject often serves as a pipeline to reactionary, misogynist, or neoliberal immunopolitical cultures set on policing the boundaries between the self and the inferior or unwanted other. We conclude by speculating on how a more distributed understanding of agential self might serve as an antidote to these immunopolitical tendencies.

Keywords

agency panic, NPC, media addiction, autonomous subject, distributed agency, immunopolitics



Fig. 1: Source: <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1655656347889704965>

'Assume you're always being manipulated', Elon Musk recently tweeted to his millions of followers.[1] Attached to the tweet was a cartoon which played on the rather banal finding from psychology that we rather suspect others to be duped and controlled than we do ourselves (Fig. 1). Nevertheless, Musk's cautionary message speaks to a creeping sense in our contemporary culture that we inhabit media environments that are highly manipulable and opaque. According to Musk and his followers, these risky media ecologies manipulate information, control narratives, and suppress alternative viewpoints. These inconspicuous but omnipresent networks of influence, therefore, corrupt our thoughts, sway our desires, and threaten our agency. This compromised sense of agency corresponds to what Timothy Melley refers to as agency panic: a set of anxieties 'about an apparent loss of agency or self-control – a conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been "constructed" by powerful agents'.[2] Writing at the turn of the millennium, Melley traces these anxieties in Cold War literature and film, demonstrating how these cultural texts frequently depict a world full of people who feel they are acting out parts in the script written by someone else, who are programmed to have certain thoughts and feelings, and so on.

In this paper, we aim to update Melley's concept of agency panic for our digital epoch. While Melley assumes that agency panic emerges as a response to the all-pervasive influence of global networks of communication and capital in which modern life is becoming increasingly embedded in the 20th century, our investigation is situated within algorithmically-powered digital environments. We suggest that in the age of datafied platforms, search engines, and recommendation systems, these anxieties of influence and compromised agency persist and take on new forms specific to the logic of digital networks.[3] Their manifestations can be found in mundane forms of agency *anxiety* when encountering an eerily personalised online advertisement, but they can also encompass cases of full-blown agency panic, which suspect monolithic networks of influence as the prime movers of otherwise unintelligible events.

Our analysis focuses on two figures of precarious agency in contemporary digital culture: the non-playable character meme (NPC) popularised in reactionary and conspiratorial discourses online, and the pathologised figure of the user as a media addict. Engaging with these two distinct modalities of digitally-native agency panic, our aim is to demonstrate how the anguish linked to the diminished sense of agency persists in our networked condition. NPC, our first focal point, originally refers to any video game character that is not controlled by a player, and typically fulfills various supporting roles in the game's storyline. Yet, these roles are completely scripted as they merely execute, in the manner of a computer program, a strictly prescribed set of rules that clearly define the circuits of possible actions. Our analysis focuses on the figure of the NPC, the passive automaton, as it reappears in the discursive practices of conspiratory online subcultures. This loss of agency is central also to the figure of media or internet addict. We analyse different discourses of addiction, which present the media addict as 'bad user': not *an agent* fully in control of her technologies, but rather as a patient completely enveloped by the compulsive loops that tie her to the addictive substance, be it a particular device, an app, online porn, or online gaming.

In agreement with Melley, our contention is that at the root of agency panic remains an attachment to a particular understanding of the human subject. In particular, we suggest that the anxieties about one's agency manifesting themselves in the discourses surrounding NPCs and media addicts issue from holding on to the liberal-humanist conception of the self as autonomous, self-determined, and rational agent. Melley deconstructs the metaphysical assumptions that underlie agency panic and its corresponding conception of the self as follows:

First, one must believe individuals ought to be rational, motivated agents in full control of themselves. This assumption, in turn, entails a strict metaphysics of inside and outside; that is, the self must be a clearly bounded entity, with an interior core of unique beliefs, memories, desires easily distinguished

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from the external influences and controls [...]. Finally, one must view control as an individual property, something that is possessed either by the individual or by external influences.[4]

For him, then, agency panic issues from an insistence of seeing oneself as intentional and self-contained in an environment whose agential forces inherently defy such aspiration. It is grounded in the all-or-nothing understanding of agency, which sees agential powers as either entirely on the side of an individual agent, or on the side of the active and omnipotent environment.

Benjamin Bratton sees this demand for full autonomy in an 'alien' environment of pervasively networked dependencies as the main tension in our contemporary society. He sees the digital subject as

frozen in place by the impossible contradictory demands of being both embedded inside a planetary society that mediates itself through vast physical connections of information, energy, and matter, and simultaneously asked to realize their potential as a self-sovereign autonomous agent.[5]

According to Bratton, we are deeply intertwined in planetary-scale computational systems, where we are at the same time constantly processed and manipulated as malleable data subjects and interpellated as autonomous users. As these black-boxed computational networks continuously undermine our fantasy of autonomous agency, it is no 'wonder people think the 5G cell towers are melting the boundaries of their egos', he adds.[6]

Taking up this problem, in the first section we look at how in online conspiracy culture the NPC departs from a process of discursive *othering* whereby the conspiratorial subject externalises its own sense of compromised agency in hypermediated digital environments, in order to maintain its own sense of control. However, as we will show, it does so at the cost of paranoia, and cultivating a hypervigilant stance toward any external influences. Musk's tweet would be an example of this paranoid strategy of hypervigilance, where you should always assume that you are being manipulated. From there, the second section examines different discourses of addiction linked to online cultures as manifestations of digital agency panic. In particular, we examine how the concept of addiction is played out in the discourses of Digital Detox and NoFap. We argue that it is the insistence on seeing human subjects as autonomous agents that leads these discourses to stigmatise and pathologise certain forms of interaction with digital devices as addiction.

In our extended concluding section we try to situate digital agency panic between two poles, the first corresponds to its toxic intensification, the other to its potential de-escalation. The first pole is constituted by reactionary immunopolitics, which, as we demonstrate, is a forceful tendency that characterises digital-panic ridden subjectivities. This reactionary immunopolitics consists of enforcing and policing boundaries that separate the self from the corrupting, contaminating, and inferior other. The second pole corresponds to habituating a more distributed view of agency, which we explore through

the cybernetic account of addiction developed by Gregory Bateson. In his work on *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Bateson found that the fantasy of free will and rational mastery ultimately keep addicts entrapped in the habitual patterns they seek to break. Building on his account, we similarly suggest that the all-or-nothing view of agency that the figure of the NPC and media addict uphold by way of negative example risks sustaining the automated and addictive patterns that it is supposed to escape. Rather than advocating a schizophrenic dissolution of the self within the digital networks that enable and shape its actions, here we call for what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to as 'the art of caution'.

Externalisation: The NPC as network paranoia

The NPC meme started on 4chan's video games board /v/ in July 2016 but only took off in 2018 when it was combined with the Wojak meme.[7] At this point it was adopted by the online far right as a tool to dehumanise political opponents on the left (Fig. 2). The digital folklorisation of scientific research that claimed that some people do not have inner monologues only fueled the flames of this rhetoric. In various explainer videos on the NPC meme, for example, Alt-right influencers like Joseph Watson mock so-called 'social justice warriors' (SJWs) by depicting their slogans as robotic and mindless.[8]

In these right-wing discourses, the NPC represents a total conformist who has no inner monologue, cannot think for herself, and is unknowingly programmed by the media she consumes. However, the meme has been appropriated by the left as well (Fig. 3). In both cases, computer code is used to dramatise the 'scripted' nature of the agents depicted, whether they be 'social justice warriors' on the Left or 'Trumpists' on the Right, e.g. the idea that Trumpists use the 'fake news' trope to counter any news that does not fit their world view becomes written as:

```
if (facts != world_view)
  { print "fake news";}
```



Fig. 2: Source: <https://peakd.com/@corbettreport/know-your-memes-npc>.

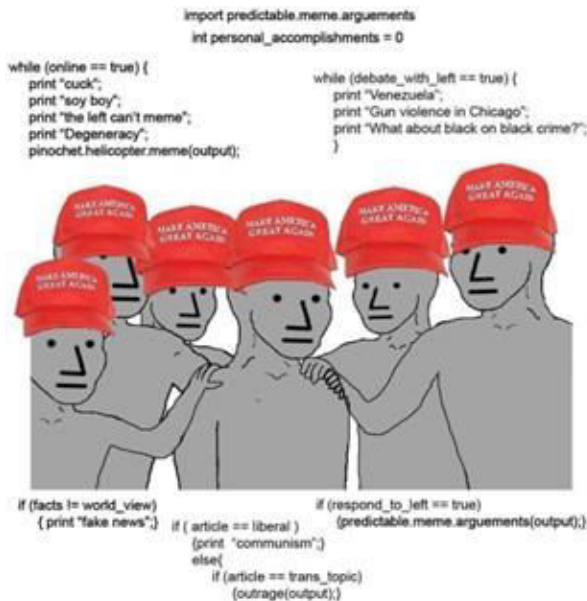


Fig. 3: Source: <https://peakd.com/@corbettreport/know-your-memes-npc>.

Recently, TikTok creators like PinkyDoll and Cherry Crush have popularised the genre of ‘NPC streaming’ where live streamers respond to viewers’ micro-donations (displayed as emojis on the screen) by performing a standardised utterance, creating a mesmerising flow of repetitive gestures. While this genre seems to have a different vernacular lineage than right-wing or conspiratorial uses of the NPC meme, its highly composed and uncanny performance is inspired by non-playable characters in video games. It also shares with

these other uses an ideation of the digital subject as a mere vessel responding to real-time stimuli in a reflex-based, 'automatic' manner.

While sociologists have investigated the 'humanisation' of technological others in video games,[9] the NPC meme instead marks a 'technologisation' of the human other in an environment that increasingly defies the distinction between simulation, game, and 'real life'. In jumping from the world of games to the online world, the NPC meme reflects the broader 'gamification' of the public sphere.[10]

Besides the reactionary right, the NPC meme has also been taken up in online conspiracy culture. Here it is used to distinguish 'truthers' from trolls, shills, and bots within their own community, e.g. claiming they have 'found the NPC'. [11] More often, however, users portray themselves in a more unified way as 'enlightened victims' against a general NPC other, thus combining 'community superiority and the perceived delusion/threat of outsiders'. [12] As a form of othering, the NPC acts as a memetic shorthand for the credulous 'normie' who never questions and always replicates mainstream 'frames'. [13] Here the status of the NPC is that of the duped other, versus those who are 'awakened to' and 'see through' the workings of the media and of power. Relegating existing anxieties of influence and compromised agency onto an external other is what allows this subject to sustain its sense of autonomy and control. This opens up a reading of NPC memes as instances of agency panic as described by Melley.

While this is not the place for a full content analysis, some examples from the popular subreddit r/Conspiracy might prove helpful. In a post titled "The reason things are so bad is because most people are NPC's" (11 April 2023, 323 upvotes), a user writes:

They accept everything the system does because they are incapable of any kind of independent thought. They are completely controlled by the media. If a person speaks out against the system the NPC's turn on him because the media told them to.[14]

To this, another user replies:

We cannot underestimate the second-order effect of this. That is, the vast majority of people who are not NPCs have no awareness of how many people are. When presented with the idea, they will find any and every reason to reject it. Want proof? Scroll up and down the comments to this very post.

A lot of NPC mentions on the subreddit seem related to the COVID-19 pandemic. A combination of lockdowns and mask-wearing in public spaces – whereby people's faces indeed assume an NPC-like sheen – likely contributed to the popularity of the NPC meme by skeptics of the way the pandemic was treated, expressing surprise or outrage at the amount of complicity by other people and the media.[15] In a post titled 'Am I the only one thats [sic] starting to feel like the world is a bunch of NPC's?' (26 October 2021, 312 upvotes), a user writes:

In the area i live, we went through the lockdowns and mask mandates and then we relaxed it all then our state put us back on mask mandates and at that point i was done with masks. I stopped wearing them pretty much everywhere. Now i go in the store and everyone is masked up and eyeing me and i feel like im in this MMO video game with all these NPC's and somehow my reputation went into chaotic neutral for not wearing my mask. I literally feel like people are so reprogrammed and in so much fear and have been gaslighted for questioning all of this that they walk around like zombie mode almost.[16]

What these narrations of personal experience share – in a way that explains their use of the NPC meme – is a hyper-individualistic conception of agency, one anchored in the desire ‘to keep free of social controls by seeing the self as its truest self when standing in stark opposition to a hostile social order’.[17] Attributing this sense of compromised agency to such an externalised other or out-group is what allows this paranoid subject to preserve its own sense of empowerment and control. There often exists a strangely affirmative mirroring relationship here, between an all-powerful conspiratorial group manipulating the general public on one side and the conspiracists’ own intimate and esoteric knowledge of these ill-intending machinations on the other. Yet there also always remains a destabilising transitivity to the lingering suspicion of others as NPCs – namely that the conspiracist may be an NPC herself. Such a paradox of solipsism or ‘epistemic superiority’ in a world of NPCs is staged by the meme in Fig. 4.

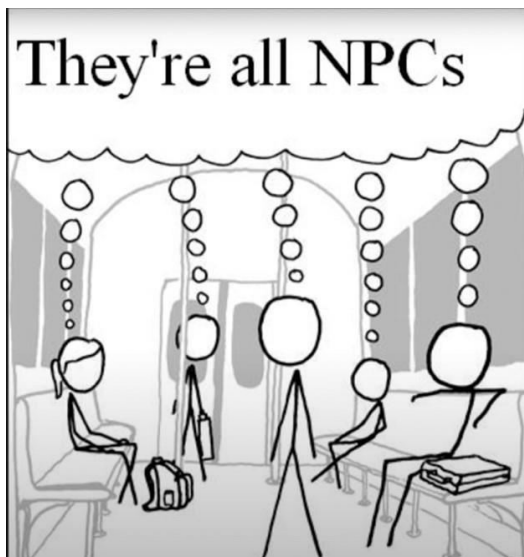


Fig. 4: Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1414450-stick-figures-with-same-thought-bubble-on-a-train>

The fear that we are nothing but programs running their routines continues to haunt digital culture, reiterating – under new technological conditions – long-standing suspicions

of humans as machines or automatons. The metaphors and narratives are updated based on the dominant technology of the era, from mechanical contraptions or ‘influence machines’ to NPCs. In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, for example, Baudrillard already evoked the postmodern specter of a splintered, border-line schizophrenic subject that has lost all sense of boundary between self and environment: ‘too great a proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance, with no halo of private protection, not even his own body, to protect him anymore’.[18] Writing in the context of television and the emergence of computer modeling in the 1980s, Baudrillard observed how new media environments (and their statistical probing by pollsters and commercial analysts) already reduce the subject to ‘a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence’.[19]

Later, theorists of cultural globalisation like Arjun Appadurai would characterise these global mediascapes as rhizomatic and even schizophrenic, and more recently Krause Frantzen (2019) showed how this new constellation also births a new form of alienation, where ‘[u]nlike the alienation of yesterday, which always implied *distance* [...] alienation today seems characterized by *proximity and immersion*’.[20] It is this form of alienation, for which everything is too close and too much, that characterises what Joque refers to as the ‘nodal subject’ of digital capitalism, i.e. the subject knotted into larger networks of economic, informatic, and affective flows.[21]

Similarly, Gallagher and Topinka contend that the NPC meme poses legitimate questions of the nature of digital agency as distributed ‘among human, machinic and algorithmic actors’. Discussions on the NPC meme in online forums often express ‘a palpable fear that digital media reduce human subjectivity to a highly constrained set of user options that, once selected, become traceable data points fueling the algorithmic optimisation machines of digital platforms’.[22] Even on the part of platforms themselves, as the prevalence of so-called CAPTCHAs (Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart) attests to, the suspicion exists that we – as users of the platform – might be robots, and that to gain access to these systems we are required to confirm our status as humans, or rather, non-robots (Fig. 5). This means that, as Grant Bollmer notes, “‘humanness’ as such is not assumed online, but is attributed to a user through a minimal act of pattern recognition’.[23] As such the NPC meme is ‘symptomatic of the processes of dehumanisation within techno-mediations of subjectivity’.[24] In his account, Günther Hack offers a similar reading of the NPC meme as symptomatic of digitally-mediated sociality, a condition he refers to as ‘network paranoia’:

If everything is an interface, a gateway to something else, then everything is a representative element without substance. You never know who’s in charge and who’s just a pawn.[25]



Fig. 5: Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1418308-npc-wojak>.

We find a precursor to the NPC in what is perhaps the most famous case of paranoid delusion, namely that of the German judge Paul Schreber treated by Freud. He talks about people around him as ‘cursorily improvised men’, the unreal, insignificant, and irrelevant extras that populate the world only as atmosphere actors. These inconsequential entities provide the background to Schreber’s delusions of grandeur. It is only after his recovery that Schreber is willing to concede that ‘the persons I see about me are not “cursorily improvised men” but real people, and that I must therefore behave towards them as a reasonable man is used to behave towards his fellows’.[26] Schreber’s case suggests that our existential sense of other people ties into an intersubjectively shared world, whose breakdown paranoia embodies and further entrenches.

In the existing literature, paranoia is persistently correlated to a strong ‘ego function’. It is marked by a strict observance of the difference between self and other. In Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, former Nazi doctor turned paranoid psychoanalyst Dr. Hilarius states:

There is me, there are the others. You know, with the LSD, we’re finding, the distinction begins to vanish. Egos lose their sharp edges. But I never took the drug, I chose to remain in relative paranoia, where at least I know who I am and who the others are.[27]

By contrast, in another one of Pynchon’s books, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, one of the main characters ‘feels himself sliding onto the anti-paranoid part of his cycle, feels the whole city around him going back roofless, vulnerable, uncentered as he is’.[28] Rather than centering the self and maintaining the separation between self and other, anti-paranoia is associated with precarious openness (‘roofless’) and ‘uncentering’.

The reference to a cycle seems crucial here. It suggests that through paranoia (qua perception of malignant external forces), the subject becomes decentered to the point of

reaching the anti-paranoid stage of schizophrenic indifferentiation. Yet it is the same paranoid mechanism which then steps in to recenter and re-differentiate the subject from its environment, starting the cycle all over again. As Timothy Melley observes in his discussion of postmodern fiction, 'the threat of "schizophrenic" dissolution provokes "paranoid" attempts to defend the integrity of the self'.^[29]

In these cases, we maintain that the recognition of an external threat to self-control and sovereignty is effectively leveraged to shore up the integrity of the self. In the case of the reactionary NPC discourse, this shoring up of one's perception of agency is achieved by means of divisive maneuvers that seek to enforce borders between the self and the non-self, the active main character and the mindless automatons, the NPCs. Our contention is that these divisive tactics could be understood as what Frédéric Neyrat refers to as *immunopolitics*. Immunopolitics consists of maneuvers that constitute and uphold the identity through differentiating oneself from the inferior other, in the same way that, for instance, hegemonic masculinity was historically maintained through differentiation from women, homosexuals, and racialised masculinities.^[30] By opposing oneself to NPCs, online reactionaries thus constitute themselves as sovereign individuals and externalise their compromised sense of agency onto the controlled and dehumanised other, the passive automaton.

Stigmatisation: The 'bad' user

According to Melley, conspiratorial accounts about powerful yet obscure networks of control are not the only manifestation of agency panic. He locates this deep-seated anxiety about the capacity for autonomous action also in the post-war fiction dealing with addiction. Excavating the logic of addiction in William Burroughs's writing, Melley suggests that addiction 'discourse is governed by a refusal to abandon the assumptions of [liberal humanism], despite an anxious sense that they fail to explain the unsettling compulsions that seem to be turning us into addicts'.^[31] In order to conserve the liberal view of the self as autonomous, the connections, communications, and dependencies that link the subject to their environment have to be denounced and/or interpreted as addictions. As the influence of socio-technical networks in which Burroughs's characters are embedded is becoming increasingly omnipresent, the paranoid safe-guarding of the idea of individual autonomy leads them to see everything as potentially compromising their agency. In this way, Melley suggests, the 'apparent existence of multifarious, powerful addictive threats shores up and revivifies the embattled [...] fantasy of individual autonomy'.^[32] Our contention is that the same logic underlies contemporary discourses of media addiction attribution, which pathologise different forms of interactions with digital technologies as addictions. In this section, we continue to develop the idea of digital agency panic by

provisionally analysing some of these discourses, which present the users of networked devices as 'bad' users – that is, abusers or addicts.

One of the dominant contemporary discourses grounded in the idea of technology addiction is that of digital detox. Digital detox describes a set of practices that are said to help establish a periodic disconnection from our all-consuming interaction with networked devices, and thus help us kick our digital addiction. It promises a break from the constant bombardment of notifications, emails, and messages, and the stimulation they provide, in order to help one reconnect with oneself. While these tactics of disconnection are widely discussed in Reddit and YouTube communities, they have also been developed into an industry that encompasses everything from apps aiming to decrease screen time to self-help books, and digital detox tourism offering retreats that guarantee a Wi-fi free zone.[33] According to Sylvertsen and Enli, who conducted a wide-ranging analysis of the commercial texts promoting digital detox, an underlying theme of this discourse is that of authenticity.[34] Yet, a closer look at the discourse they analyse reveals a strong presence of concerns linked to diminished agency.

One of the texts, for instance, suggests that the

addict experiences [the] loss of time on the regular basis. Because she spends so much time in isolation staring at her phone, tablet, or computer screen, she often has no idea what time it is.[35]

Immersed in endless streams of information and tethered to the infinite feeds, an addict is not only separated from authenticity that is associated with being present in the moment, but also from her capacity to act. Her overwhelming digital immersion prevents her from making autonomous decisions about how to spend her time. Digital detox texts provide different tips on how to regain one's agency. 'Detox retreats', for example, write Sylvertsen and Enli, 'typically help customers *to regain control* over time by confiscating intrusive digital devices'.[36] The imperative of regaining control over one's use of digital devices is in fact the central injunction in the digital detox discourse. Needless to say, the idea of the user presupposed here is strongly rooted in an instrumentalist ideology which places agency completely on the side of the individual user, who has the freedom to use a wholly neutral technology in an appropriate or inappropriate manner. The inappropriate use here ultimately results in losing control and becoming an addict, a passive node in a network.

The imperative to reclaim control is most clearly articulated by a tech writer who sees it as the ultimate aim of digital detox:

You control what you spend your days on. It's you who determines whether you control technology or let technology control you.[37]

This all-or-nothing conception of the capacity to act grounds the logic of agency panic. The practices of digital detox, such as limiting screen time, abandoning playing video games, and quitting online porn, seek to establish and police the boundary between the self and its technological environment, and making sure that the agential forces are on the side of the former. The accounts of Reddit users on r/DigitalDetox often depict the immersive nature of networked digital environments as threatening or even alive. In line with Donna Haraway's observation that 'our machines are disturbingly lively', these accounts report that the mere experience of closeness of a networked device is enough to induce a state of fidgety restlessness, and cause a relapse into the state of technological immersion.[38]

Interestingly, one Redditer also suggests that to make digital detox work one has to 'cut out weed and alcohol (and any other drugs)'.[39] This proposition is telling in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of drunkenness as 'a triumphant irruption of the plant in us'.[40] For them, drunkenness, and the loss of inhibition that comes with it, makes us more plant-like – that is, more *rhizomatic*: more capable of indiscriminately forming connections with whatever in our environment is able to enhance our capacity to act. As the practices of digital detox anxiously safe-guard the self-contained individual and its autonomy, any immersive engagement with our technological environment is seen as potentially compromising. The experience of digital detox is, conversely, compared by another Reddit user to 'pulling out the plug in the bath'.[41] Digital detox is here presented as a way of freeing oneself from the mindless and unreflective state that corresponds to the shallow pleasures of infinite feeds. This is accompanied by the distress that arises when one is forced to face with sober senses their real conditions of life.

Yet, this same user acknowledges that 'if you don't have another plug to put in its place[, you're just going to put the old plug back in'.[42] To avoid falling back under the intoxicating influence of immersive digital technologies, it is suggested to replace them with less compromising tools and techniques, such as colouring books, comics, and meditation. As Digital Detox seeks to suspend the ceaseless immersion in digital communication, perhaps it could be interpreted as the creation of 'vacuoles of noncommunication', which Deleuze in his later work sees as a necessary precondition for any effective form of political resistance.[43] Deleuze assumes that we are – 'riddled with pointless talk, insane quantities of words and images' – suffering from an excess of communication.[44] Our only way to resist the technologically-assisted reproduction of status quo is to create spaces of silence and solitude that allow for creation of new artistic and political projects. Yet, as Sylvertsen convincingly argues, not only has Digital Detox been effectively co-opted by the emerging self-help industry, it is frequently mobilised in

the context of competitive and hyper-individualistic entrepreneurial cultures.[45] As the discourse of Digital Detox thus generally seeks to 'regain control' to excel at hustle culture, neoliberal productivity, or the grind, it is currently hard to see it as enabling new forms of political disruption.

The idea of losing control and regaining it is also central to the NoFap movement. NoFap is an online community of typically white heterosexual men that seeks to overcome addiction to porn and promotes abstinence from masturbation. It has been linked to the manosphere, a loose collection of predominantly web-based misogynistic subcultures.[46] While some see NoFap as manosphere-adjacent, or as a pipeline to manospheric beliefs, some place it firmly within the domain of manosphere.[47] While the primary object of addiction with NoFap is masturbation, it has to be noted that digital environments play a key role here. It is only with the emergence of the immediate access to endless databases of pornography that the inhibiting regression of masculinity takes place. By exploring how the NoFappers frame this regression, we also aim to underscore what Melley terms 'the masculinist biases of liberal individualism' and its conception of self, whose characteristic mastery, autonomy, and control are also the defining traits of hegemonic masculinities.[48]

According to Hartmann, the central aspect of the NoFap movement is indeed establishing masturbation abstinence as key to the performance of masculinity.[49] Relying on the discourse of evolutionary psychology, the NoFappers believe that masturbation upsets the male dopamine circuitry of effort and pleasure. As digital porn and masturbation enable pleasure without effort, the male organism loses incentive to exert the effort to make oneself attractive to women (by going to the gym, earning money, etc.) and in this way earning pleasure by engaging in sexual intercourse. This leads the masturbating man down the spiral of disaffection: 'he becomes a nonself, an emasculated version of the authentic heterosexual man he truly is (destined to be)'.[50]

As noted, NoFap's understanding of online porn and masturbation draws on addiction discourse. Habitually indulging in online porn, the masturbating man is unable to exercise control and mastery over his sexual urges, which aligns him with the figure of an addict. The porn addict 'loses agential powers to porn with masturbatory consumption spiralling out of control'.[51] Instead of actively making an effort to attract women and earn sexual pleasure, he succumbs to passively consuming pornographic images. The masturbating man, Hartmann suggests, 'is overpowered by negative externalities colonizing him', which 'turns him into a leaky vessel; shitting his pants, crying all the time, the bounded self becomes porous, that is, feminine'.[52] Similar to the NPC meme in this respect, NoFap's portrayal of a masturbator is aligned with the figure of a controlled or programmed meat

puppet. No longer autonomous and self-contained, with desires, beliefs, and memories clearly separated from the environment, and fully in possession of himself, the masturbator's agency is lost to the malign influence of porn.

The ultimate aim of NoFappers is to overcome their addiction to porn in order to regain control and become the men they were destined to become. A NoFapper analysed by Hartman describes how refraining from masturbation enabled a recognition that he has always been the sole source of agency in this way:

I finally realised 'Hey, it's always been me. I've always been the one that has had the free will, that has this decision, that keeps fucking up, it has always been me, it has always been my decision.' So, you need to make the decision today that you're gonna stop being a little bitch.[53]

The idea of an addict as presupposed in this account corresponds to the critique by Eve Sedgwick.[54] For her, addiction discourse tends to frame an addict as someone with an insufficient freedom of will. Sedgwick suggests that as addiction discourse clings on to the idea of a self-determined individual it involves the misleading 'propaganda of free will'.[55] The post-masturbatory man of NoFap sees himself as kicking the addiction precisely by strengthening his willpower: by overcoming the lures of immediate gratification of porn, he is able to discipline himself into a strong, independent, and attractive man. As concisely spelled out by Hartmann, not 'to be a little bitch is enforcing one's uncompromised agency, taking up full responsibility for oneself, and restoring a bounded self that polices its boundaries'.[56] This aspirational attachment to the idea of a masculine self-contained agent, which is always haunted by the anxiety of being overpowered and undermined by the temptations of porn, is fully aligned with the logic of agency panic.

The cybernetic self: Between paranoid and fluid boundaries

An account of addiction that centers around the concept of the autonomous individual is, as anticipated, articulated by Bateson. In his view, it is precisely the fantasy of self-determination that ultimately undermines the addict's chances for recovery. Analysing the approach of *Alcoholics Anonymous* in treating alcoholism, Bateson differentiates between two different ways of understanding the self.[57] What he refers to as the *epistemology of self-control* corresponds to the liberal-humanist view of the sovereign individual: a subject that is hermetically sealed from its environment, and ultimately depends on nothing outside of itself for its actions. Bateson criticises this notion of the self as 'a false reification of an improperly delimited part of this much larger field of interlocking processes'.[58] Instead, what he refers to as the *epistemology of cybernetics* acknowledges this field of interconnecting circuits in which an individual is embedded, and in which 'no part of [it]

can have unilateral control over the remainder or over any other part'.[59] From this cybernetic perspective, an individual is a set of distributed circuits of communication.

Bateson attributes the success of the twelve-step AA programme to the fact that it helps addicts to transition from the self-defeating epistemology of control, which characterises the alcoholic in periods of sobriety, to a more open and ecological view of the self. Put differently, the AA programme allows them to grasp that they are a part of a larger system, or 'ecology of mind', which they cannot control, and in this way helps them come to terms with their compromised sense of agency. Bateson claims that alcoholics drink in the first place to absolve themselves of the unattainable fantasy of control and autonomy, and the feelings of responsibility, guilt, and loneliness that it inevitably produces. In the state of drunkenness, they see themselves as fundamentally connected with their world, or, to put it in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, they become plants capable of forming rhizomatic systems with their surroundings. Once the intoxication ends, the alcoholic defaults back to the epistemology of self-control. They try to battle their alcoholism by reaffirming his autonomy (to 'be the captain of his soul' and stay 'strong and resist the temptation') and take back the reins over the bottle and their environment.[60] Yet, since this kind of control over the network of relations in which they are embedded is ultimately impossible, this results in a relapse.

For Bateson, our fantasy of autonomy thus effectively gets in the way of overcoming the state of addiction, and inhibits our capacity for action. Instead of trying to use self-control to fight the temptation, the AA programme helps the alcoholic to embrace the cybernetic view of the self as articulated by a wider system of relations. Paradoxically, an alcoholic can thus regain a degree of agency by giving up the fantasy of autonomous agency, which underlies agency panic. If we transpose this to the discourse of internet addiction, we could say that it involves overcoming instrumentalist ideology and accepting that users do not exert mastery over networked devices. Instead, as Paasonen puts it, devices and applications should be seen as 'the loci of potentiality that may or may not be available and which impact – increase, sustain, or diminish – the users' capacity to act'.[61] These socio-technological networks are, for her, 'something of a precondition of existence that modulates the shapes and forms of individual agency in a culture characterized by ubiquitous network connectivity'.[62]

Indeed, the digital infrastructure that facilitates and shapes our mundane habitual actions is increasingly complex and extensive as it includes algorithmic systems, submarine communication cables, minerals in our smartphone batteries, data centers, but also

laborers that produce, extract, or maintain them, etc. Since our agency is inevitably reliant on these elaborate networks, Paasonen claims that

compromised agency is in fact characteristic of a much more general human condition. Human agency is shaped and conditioned by a range of networks and forces beyond individual control, such as [technology,] economy, climate, and law.[63]

When our everyday activities, as different theories of distributed agency in an era of planetary-scale computation corroborate, depend on these wider agential ecologies, the ideal of a rational autonomous individual, one that is fully in control of inert technical objects, becomes ever more unsustainable.

Paasonen rightly reminds us that the vernacular concepts of internet addiction, which attribute it based on criteria like screen time, ignore these infrastructural dependencies.[64] Disregarding that digital networks facilitate our jobs, friendships, entertainment, travel, etc., these accounts of addiction frame the internet as an addictive substance akin to alcohol, and its users as addicts driven by compulsion. Since addiction framed in this way entails a loss of individual autonomy, which is implicitly presented as potentially attainable in full, we suggest these discourses can be seen as *inducing* digital agency panic. Bateson's approach, as said, advocates for an overcoming of this obstructing and alienating fantasy of autonomy. To overcome this fantasy, of course, does not simply mean to fully immerse and lose oneself in networked interaction, which would equate to falling in line with the imperatives of platform capitalism. Instead, it consists of cultivating an understanding of the socio-technological ecologies that enable or frustrate our ability to act, and of experimenting to find out under what conditions they can enhance it.

Perhaps the favorable conditions for empowering our ability to act do indeed require what Deleuze refers to as the creation of *vacuoles of non-communication*. According to Deleuze, such vacuoles are necessary as 'communication has been corrupted' by contemporary digital technologies, and 'thoroughly permeated by money'.[65] As the affordances of these algorithmic technologies (such as recommendation systems) encourage us to ceaselessly communicate, enjoy, and express ourselves, this communication is unable to give voice to oppressed minorities, but is instead inevitably defused and co-opted by the regimes of datafication and capital. As a result, Deleuze suggests that the question becomes how to provide people with 'small gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say'.[66] If the existing discourses of Digital Detox and NoFap do seek to establish such vacuoles that could enable disruptive political creativity, they sadly end up (re)producing tendencies linked to stale entrepreneurship of the self and casual misogyny.

While the establishment of these vacuoles of silence requires some detachment and setting boundaries, these need not be seen as the same kind of hard boundaries that organise the fantasy of sovereign individuals. These fluid lines can instead be linked to what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as 'the art of caution', the formative tactics needed to avoid a descent into complete schizophrenisation and dissolution of the self. While Deleuze and Guattari see disentanglement of the normalised self as empowering (it breaks off the attachments that inhibit our capacities), they nevertheless insist that any kind of politics requires a degree of tactical structure or organisation.[67] As opposed to these fluid *ad-hoc* lines of organisation, we suggest that the boundaries that ostensibly circumscribe the self-contained individual of liberal humanism yield, or at least provide the conditions of possibility for, the paranoid boundaries that ground the reactionary immunopolitics. What these immunopolitical subjectivities cling to, David Lapoujade suggests,

is the limit that they mark out [...]. 'From now on, it's my home, it's mine ...' We can see this in paranoid investment, which makes the limit a jealously guarded, in principle impassable, frontier.[...] The limit must preserve an identity of unalloyed purity, protect its territorialities from foreign infiltrations or invisible spies; it must shield a healthy body from microbes and filth.[68]

As we have explained, the fantasy of an autonomous individual that grounds agency panic is, in the case of addiction discourse, maintained by policing the boundaries between the self and networked technologies. On the other hand, the reactionary online milieu, the origin of the conspiratorial NPC discourse, shores up its sense of autonomy by enforcing the border between the self, the supposed site of self-determination and authenticity, and the other, a passive and mindless automaton. In this way, the NPC functions as a screen for projecting their own diminished sense of agency.

While we have claimed that digital agency panic that underlies discourses surrounding addiction and NPCs is rooted in this liberal notion of the self, our analysis suggests that the politics associated with their corresponding digital milieus is often immunological. These immunopolitical tendencies can be observed with the populist conspiracism of online reactionaries, the toxic masculinity linked to NoFap, or the neoliberal grindset associated with Digital Detox. Disinvesting the fantasy of self-control and affirming the distributed view of agency might not be the silver bullet that would immediately cure digital agency panic and suppress the immunopolitical tendencies that it engenders. Still, we suspect that it could be a step in the right direction. If our experimentations with creative desubjectification practice the art of caution they have the potential to help us cultivate a more empowering relation to our technologies, as well as to other people.

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