

Excerpted from
“Trick Mirror” by Jia Tolentino
p. 29 – 33 (‘The I In Internet’), 63 – 68 (‘Always Be Optimizing’)

The final, and possibly most psychologically destructive, distortion of the social internet is its distortion of scale. This is not an accident but an essential design feature: social media was constructed around the idea that a thing is important insofar as it is important to you. In an early internal memo about the creation of Facebook’s News Feed, Mark Zuckerberg observed, already beyond parody, “A squirrel dying in front of your house may be more

relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa.” The idea was that social media would give us a fine-tuned sort of control over what we looked at. What resulted was a situation where we—first as individuals, and then inevitably as a collective—are essentially unable to exercise control at all. Facebook’s goal of showing people only what they were interested in seeing resulted, within a decade, in the effective end of shared civic reality. And this choice, combined with the company’s financial incentive to continually trigger heightened emotional responses in its users, ultimately solidified the current norm in news media consumption: today we mostly consume news that corresponds with our ideological alignment, which has been fine-tuned to make us feel self-righteous and also mad.

In *The Attention Merchants*, Tim Wu observes that technologies designed to increase control over our attention often have the opposite effect. He uses the TV remote control as one example. It made flipping through channels “practically nonvolitional,” he writes, and put viewers in a “mental state not unlike that of a newborn or a reptile.” On the internet, this dynamic has been automated and generalized in the form of endlessly varied but somehow monotonous social media feeds—these addictive, numbing fire hoses of information that we aim at our brains for much of the day. In front of the timeline, as many critics have noted, we exhibit classic reward-seeking lab-rat behavior, the sort that’s observed when lab rats are put in front of an unpredictable food dispenser. Rats will eventually stop pressing the lever if their device dispenses food regularly or not at all. But if the lever’s rewards are rare and irregular, the rats will never stop pressing it. In other words, it is *essential* that social media is mostly unsatisfying. That is what keeps us scrolling, scrolling, pressing our lever over and over in the hopes of getting some fleeting sensation—some momentary rush of recognition, flattery, or rage.

Like many among us, I have become acutely conscious of the way my brain degrades when I strap it in to receive the full barrage

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of the internet—these unlimited channels, all constantly reloading with new information: births, deaths, boasts, bombings, jokes, job announcements, ads, warnings, complaints, confessions, and political disasters blitzing our frayed neurons in huge waves of information that pummel us and then are instantly replaced. This is an awful way to live, and it is wearing us down quickly. At the end of 2016, I wrote a blog post for *The New Yorker* about the cries of “worst year ever” that were then flooding the internet. There had been terrorist attacks all over the world, and the Pulse shooting in Orlando. David Bowie, Prince, and Muhammad Ali had died. More black men had been executed by police who could not control their racist fear and hatred: Alton Sterling was killed in the Baton Rouge parking lot where he was selling CDs; Philando Castile was murdered as he reached for his legal-carry permit during a routine traffic stop. Five police officers were killed in Dallas at a protest against this police violence. Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. The North Pole was thirty-six degrees hotter than normal. Venezuela was collapsing; families starved in Yemen. In Aleppo, a seven-year-old girl named Bana Alabed was tweeting her fears of imminent death. And in front of this backdrop, there were all of *us*—our stupid selves, with our stupid frustrations, our lost baggage and delayed trains. It seemed to me that this sense of punishing oversaturation would persist no matter what was in the news. There was no limit to the amount of misfortune a person could take in via the internet, I wrote, and there was no way to calibrate this information correctly—no guidebook for how to expand our hearts to accommodate these simultaneous scales of human experience, no way to teach ourselves to separate the banal from the profound. The internet was dramatically increasing our ability to know about things, while our ability to *change* things stayed the same, or possibly shrank right in front of us. I had started to feel that the internet would only ever induce this cycle of heartbreak and hardening—a hyper-engagement that would make less sense every day.

But the worse the internet gets, the more we appear to crave it—the more it gains the power to shape our instincts and desires. To guard against this, I give myself arbitrary boundaries—no Instagram stories, no app notifications—and rely on apps that shut down my Twitter and Instagram accounts after forty-five minutes of daily use. And still, on occasion, I'll disable my social media blockers, and I'll sit there like a rat pressing the lever, like a woman repeatedly hitting myself on the forehead with a hammer, masturbating through the nightmare until I finally catch the gasoline whiff of a good meme. The internet is still so young that it's easy to retain some subconscious hope that it all might still add up to something. We remember that at one point this all felt like butterflies and puddles and blossoms, and we sit patiently in our festering inferno, waiting for the internet to turn around and surprise us and get good again. But it won't. The internet is governed by incentives that make it impossible to be a full person while interacting with it. In the future, we will inevitably be cheapened. Less and less of us will be left, not just as individuals but also as community members, as a collective of people facing various catastrophes. Distraction is a "life-and-death matter," Jenny Odell writes in *How to Do Nothing*. "A social body that can't concentrate or communicate with itself is like a person who can't think and act."

Of course, people have been carping in this way for many centuries. Socrates feared that the act of writing would "create forgetfulness in the learners' souls." The sixteenth-century scientist Conrad Gessner worried that the printing press would facilitate an "always on" environment. In the eighteenth century, men complained that newspapers would be intellectually and morally isolating, and that the rise of the novel would make it difficult for people—specifically women—to differentiate between fiction and fact. We worried that radio would drive children to distraction, and later that TV would erode the careful attention required by radio. In 1985, Neil Postman observed that the

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American desire for constant entertainment had become toxic, that television had ushered in a "vast descent into triviality." The difference is that, today, there is nowhere further to go. Capitalism has no land left to cultivate but the self. Everything is being cannibalized—not just goods and labor, but personality and relationships and attention. The next step is complete identification with the online marketplace, physical and spiritual inseparability from the internet: a nightmare that is already banging down the door.

What could put an end to the worst of the internet? Social and economic collapse would do it, or perhaps a series of antitrust cases followed by a package of hard regulatory legislation that would somehow also dismantle the internet's fundamental profit model. At this point it's clear that collapse will almost definitely come first. Barring that, we've got nothing except our small attempts to retain our humanity, to act on a model of actual selfhood, one that embraces culpability, inconsistency, and insignificance. We would have to think very carefully about what we're getting from the internet, and how much we're giving it in return. We'd have to care less about our identities, to be deeply skeptical of our own unbearable opinions, to be careful about when opposition serves us, to be properly ashamed when we can't express solidarity without putting ourselves first. The alternative is unspeakable. But you know that—it's already here.

Always Be Optimizing

The ideal woman has always been generic. I bet you can picture the version of her that runs the show today. She's of indeterminate age but resolutely youthful presentation. She's got glossy hair and the clean, shameless expression of a person who believes she was made to be looked at. She is often luxuriating when you see her—on remote beaches, under stars in the desert, across a carefully styled table, surrounded by beautiful possessions or photogenic friends. Showcasing herself at leisure is either the bulk of her work or an essential part of it; in this, she is not so unusual—for many people today, especially for women, packaging and broadcasting your image is a readily monetizable skill. She has a personal brand, and probably a boyfriend or husband: he is the physical realization of her constant, unseen audience, reaffirming her status as an interesting subject, a worthy object, a self-generating spectacle with a viewership attached.

Can you see this woman yet? She looks like an Instagram—which is to say, an ordinary woman reproducing the lessons of the marketplace, which is how an ordinary woman evolves into an ideal. The process requires maximal obedience on the part of the woman in question, and—ideally—her genuine enthusiasm, too. This woman is sincerely interested in whatever the market de-

mands of her (good looks, the impression of indefinitely extended youth, advanced skills in self-presentation and self-surveillance). She is equally interested in whatever the market offers her—in the tools that will allow her to look more appealing, to be even more endlessly presentable, to wring as much value out of her particular position as she can.

The ideal woman, in other words, is always optimizing. She takes advantage of technology, both in the way she broadcasts her image and in the meticulous improvement of that image itself. Her hair looks expensive. She spends lots of money taking care of her skin, a process that has taken on the holy aspect of a spiritual ritual and the mundane regularity of setting a morning alarm. The work formerly carried out by makeup has been embedded directly into her face: her cheekbones or lips have been plumped up, or some lines have been filled in, and her eyelashes are lengthened every four weeks by a professional wielding individual lashes and glue. The same is true of her body, which no longer requires the traditional enhancements of clothing or strategic underwear; it has been pre-shaped by exercise that ensures there is little to conceal or rearrange. Everything about this woman has been preemptively controlled to the point that she can afford the impression of spontaneity and, more important, the sensation of it—having worked to rid her life of artificial obstacles, she often feels legitimately carefree.

The ideal woman has always been conceptually overworked, an inorganic thing engineered to look natural. Historically, the ideal woman seeks all the things that women are trained to find fun and interesting—domesticity, physical self-improvement, male approval, the maintenance of congeniality, various forms of unpaid work. The concept of the ideal woman is *just* flexible enough to allow for a modicum of individuality; the ideal woman always believes she came up with herself on her own. In the Victorian era, she was the “angel in the house,” the demure, appealing wife and mother. In the fifties, she was, likewise, a demure and

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appealing wife and mother, but with household purchasing power attached. More recently, the ideal woman has been whatever she wants to be as long as she manages to act upon the belief that perfecting herself and streamlining her relationship to the world can be a matter of both work and pleasure—of “lifestyle.” The ideal woman steps into a stratum of expensive juices, boutique exercise classes, skin-care routines, and vacations, and thereby happily remains.

Most women believe themselves to be independent thinkers. (There is a Balzac short story in which a slave girl named Paquita yelps, memorably, “I love life! Life is fair to me! If I am a slave, I am a queen too.”) Even glossy women’s magazines now model skepticism toward top-down narratives about how we should look, who and when we should marry, how we should live. But the psychological parasite of the ideal woman has evolved to survive in an ecosystem that pretends to resist her. If women start to resist an aesthetic, like the overapplication of Photoshop, the aesthetic just changes to suit us; the power of the ideal image never actually wanes. It is now easy enough to engage women’s skepticism toward ads and magazine covers, images produced by professionals. It is harder for us to suspect images produced by our peers, and nearly impossible to get us to suspect the images we produce of ourselves, for our own pleasure and benefit—even though, in a time when social media use has become broadly framed as a career asset, many of us are effectively professionals now, too.

Today’s ideal woman is of a type that coexists easily with feminism in its current market-friendly and mainstream form. This sort of feminism has organized itself around being as visible and appealing to as many people as possible; it has greatly overvalored women’s individual success. Feminism has not eradicated the tyranny of the ideal woman but, rather, has entrenched it and made it trickier. These days, it is perhaps even more psychologically seamless than ever for an ordinary woman to spend her life walking toward the idealized mirage of her own self-image.

She can believe—reasonably enough, and with the full encouragement of feminism—that she herself is the architect of the exquisite, constant, and often pleasurable type of power that this image holds over her time, her money, her decisions, her selfhood, and her soul.

Figuring out how to “get better” at being a woman is a ridiculous and often amoral project—a subset of the larger, equally ridiculous, equally amoral project of learning to get better at life under accelerated capitalism. In these pursuits, most pleasures end up being traps, and every public-facing demand escalates in perpetuity. Satisfaction remains, under the terms of the system, necessarily out of reach.

But the worse things get, the more a person is compelled to optimize. I think about this every time I do something that feels particularly efficient and self-interested, like going to a barre class or eating lunch at a fast-casual chopped-salad chain, like Sweetgreen, which feels less like a place to eat and more like a refueling station. I’m a repulsively fast eater in most situations—my boyfriend once told me that I chew like someone’s about to take my food away—and at Sweetgreen, I eat even faster because (as can be true of many things in life) slowing down for even a second can make the machinery give you the creeps. Sweetgreen is a marvel of optimization: a line of forty people—a texting, shuffling, eyes-down snake—can be processed in ten minutes, as customer after customer orders a kale Caesar with chicken without even looking at the other, darker-skinned, hairnet-wearing line of people who are busy adding chicken to kale Caesars as if it were *their* purpose in life to do so and their *customers’* purpose in life to send emails for sixteen hours a day with a brief break to snort down a bowl of nutrients that ward off the unhealthfulness of urban professional living.

The ritualization and neatness of this process (and the fact that

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Sweetgreen is pretty good) obscure the intense, circular artifice that defines the type of life it's meant to fit into. The ideal chopped-salad customer is himself efficient: he needs to eat his twelve-dollar salad in ten minutes because he needs the extra time to keep functioning within the job that allows him to afford a regular twelve-dollar salad in the first place. He feels a physical need for this twelve-dollar salad, as it's the most reliable and convenient way to build up a vitamin barrier against the general malfunction that comes with his salad-requiring-and-enabling job. The first, best chronicler of the chopped-salad economy's accelerationist nightmare was Matt Buchanan, who wrote at *The Awl* in 2015:

The chopped salad is engineered . . . to free one's hand and eyes from the task of consuming nutrients, so that precious attention can be directed toward a small screen, where it is more urgently needed, so it can consume *data*: work email or Amazon's nearly infinite catalog or Facebook's actually infinite News Feed, where, as one shops for diapers or engages with the native advertising sprinkled between the not-hoaxes and baby photos, one is being productive by generating revenue for a large internet company, which is obviously good for the economy, or at least it is certainly better than spending lunch reading a book from the library, because who is making money from that?

In a later *Awl* piece, Buchanan described the chopped salad as "the perfect mid-day nutritional replenishment for the mid-level modern knowledge worker" with "neither the time nor the inclination to eat a lunch . . . which would require more attention than the little needed for the automatic elliptical motion of the arm from bowl to face, jaw swinging open and then clamping shut over and over until the fork comes up empty and the vessel can be deposited in the garbage can under the desk."

On today's terms, what he's describing—a mechanically efficient salad-feeding session, conducted in such a way that one need not take a break from emails—is the good life. It means progress, individuation. It's what you do when you've gotten ahead a little bit, when you want to get ahead some more. The hamster-wheel aspect has been self-evident for a long time now. (In 1958, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote, "It can no longer be assumed that welfare is greater at an all-around higher level of production than a lower one. . . . The higher level of production has, merely, a higher level of want creation necessitating a higher level of want satisfaction.") But today, in an economy defined by precarity, more of what was merely stupid and adaptive has turned stupid and compulsory. Vulnerability, which is ever present, must be warded off at all costs. And so I go to Sweetgreen on days when I need to eat vegetables very quickly because I've been working till one A.M. all week and don't have time to make dinner because I have to work till one A.M. again, and like a chump, I try to make eye contact across the sneeze guard, as if this alleviated anything about the skyrocketing productivity requirements that have forced these two lines of people to scarf and create kale Caesars all day, and then I "grab" my salad and eat it in under ten minutes while looking at email and on the train home remind myself that next time, for points purposes, I should probably buy the salad through the salad's designated app.

It's very easy, under conditions of artificial but continually escalating obligation, to find yourself organizing your life around practices you find ridiculous and possibly indefensible. Women have known this intimately for a long time.