

Going with the (social media) flow:

Notes on *doomscrolling* and stream flow-breakers in viral times

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Abstract

This short paper dedicates attention to a mechanism through which much of the online content is circulated, shared, and consumed nowadays: social media's infinite streams, or 'feeds'. These informational flows are central socio-technical conditions to the present-day logics of virality and memetics – phenomena that are always contingent on the existence of appropriate structures and vectors. The discussion focusses on what I am referring to as 'flow-breakers'. These are posts shared by users of stream-based social media platforms targeting other (imagined) users who are scrolling uninterruptedly through a flood of gloomy content – a practice that is now generally called '*doomscrolling*'. Stream flow-breakers not only demonstrate the current normalisation of so-called mindless, endless scrolling as part of regular social media engagements but also serve to evidence users' reflexive acknowledgement of both the readers' likely repetitive (often labelled 'addictive') behaviour, and of the stickiness of these technologies. In a context of lockdown, the 'mobility' in mobile social media is less about portability or physical movement and more about affective motility and tentative practices of dwelling in platforms that are purposefully framed as agitated and restless.

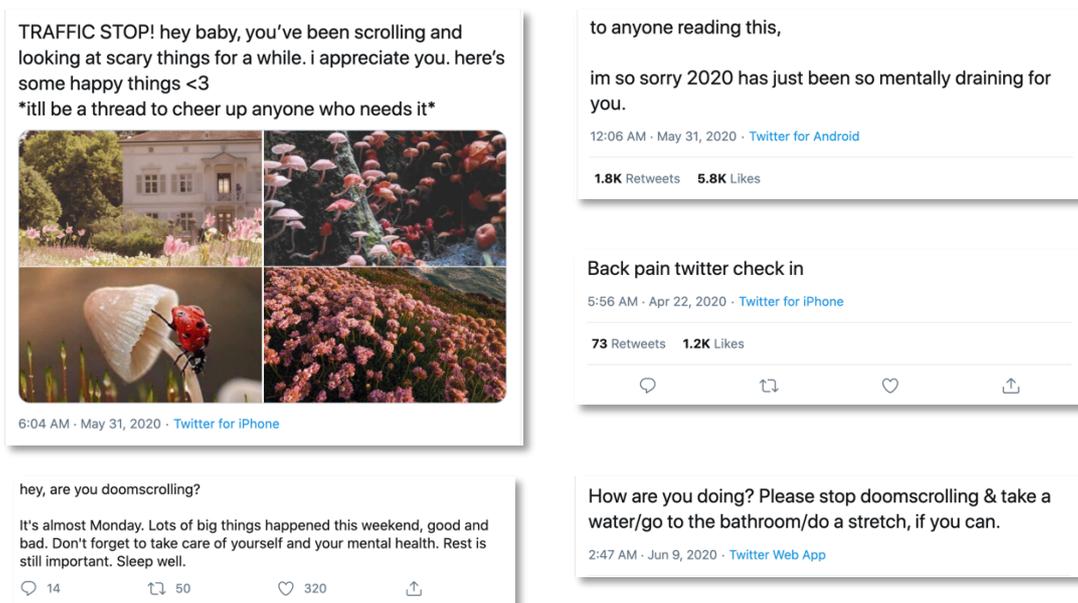
Keywords: scrolling; social media; platform; mobile media; flow; infinite stream; lockdown, phenomenology.

The use of social media platforms and mobile phones is often described in the available literature as unfocused and distracted, being characterised by a generally fleeting, almost numb attentiveness (Lovink 2019, Markham 2020) and marked by 'ambient' engagement (Hjorth and Richardson 2014). Even though there is a range of scholarship covering different aspects of the increasingly pervasive entanglements between these technologies and our everyday lives, I believe it is safe to say that, overall, discussions on mobile social media usage tend to be dominated by conceptions of it as either a side-viewed 'second screen' or a convenient but peripheral, daydreaming-like pastime for moments of micro-boredom. Whilst I do not intend to deny or diminish the existence of both phenomena, in this short commentary paper I will focus on a different type of affective modulation and techno-corporeal attachment that now represents a significant ordinary practice or arrangement: so-called *doomscrolling* (Watercutter 2020) – that is, the mobile version of *doomscrolling*, or "falling into deep, morbid rabbit holes filled with coronavirus content" (Roose 2020). The practice of anxiety-driven stress-scrolling might have originated long before the Pandemic (Holmgren and Coyne 2017), but it has certainly gained a fresh notoriety in times of enforced physical distancing and the apparently never-ending influx of bad news that we are now exposed to on a daily basis. *Doomscrolling* challenges some widespread conceptions of mobile social media use by foregrounding people's intense, visceral, frontal (even if not always deliberate) engagement with these platforms and devices.

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As an early-career researcher who is currently trying to develop a phenomenology of social media use², I couldn't help but notice the centrality acquired by endless scrolling in my own media practices in times of COVID-19 outbreaks, #BLM, and the tragical influx of outrageous episodes unfolding in places like my home country, Brazil. Still, if you are on social media and are living through 2020, chances are you intimately know that feeling as well. On a given day, my *Screen Time* app told me I had spent 8h – one-third of the whole day! – staring at my phone (and for at least half of the remaining 16h I probably did the same on my laptop while struggling with lockdown procrastination). Checking the news and my messages is the very first thing I do in the morning, and what keeps me awake for much longer than I intend to at night. Adjusting my barely-awaken sore eyes to the brightness of the phone is now as much part of my routine as is brushing my teeth. I don't even need to check my usage graphs to realise how long I spend browsing my infinite content feeds: my ocular globes are always red and dry, and my hands are constantly aching (although it feels more like a 'scroll-cramping' than the previously documented 'text-claw', I must say).

Not surprisingly, my social media streams confirmed that I was far from being the only one facing such experiences. In fact, what I noticed while endlessly trying to navigate and make sense of my own infoglut (Andrejevic 2013) was the emergence of a different type of online interaction – what I would refer to as stream 'flow-breakers'. These are posts shared by users of stream-based social media platforms (mostly *Twitter* but also *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Reddit*, *TikTok*) targeting other (imagined) users who are scrolling uninterruptedly through posts, videos, memes and (probably extremely gloomy) news:



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Infinite stream flow-breakers might seem ordinary and uneventful at first, but upon closer examination I would argue that they actually have a lot to tell us about online socialisation, content circulation, media virality, and the aesthetic of connective platforms in lockdown times. On a basic level, examples like the Tweets presented above serve as evidence for the normalisation of endless scrolling as part of our regular social media practices. This is, of course, not accidental – as documented by a range of critical scholars, encouraging uninterrupted connectivity is a crucial component of these platforms' strategies for guaranteeing users' quantifiable engagement which, in turn, is key for their targeted-advertising driven profitability (Chun 2017, Karppi 2018). Still, the fact that these posts explicitly ask the (imagined) interlocutor to 'stop' whatever they're doing to read the reassuring message suggests the acknowledgement of the habitual, naturalised, and often unnoticed character of this practice by the ordinary user. These posts break the state of attention suspension (Bissell 2017) that is assumed to characterise social media usage. While continuous scrolling has been previously theorised as a pathologised behaviour with addiction-like features employed by users to cope with situations of stress and anxiety (Holmgren and Coyne 2017), in doomscrolling the use of social media itself is understood to generate uneasiness and unrest.

In fact, the infinite stream, or feed, has now become the default structure of some of the most popular platforms (Beer 2019), despite the increasing proliferation of ephemeral content such as Stories and livestreaming video. If we start from the assumption that the logics of virality and memetics are always contingent on the existence of appropriate structures and vectors (Sampson 2012), then it makes sense to have the 'continuous flow' as the dominant socio-technical condition of social media; the mechanism of contagion in which "the promise of the next downswipe holds us in" (Beer 2019:37). Navigating these unceasing, nonstop flows requires a particular way of inhabiting the available mediascape – which has been previously theorised as the practice of wayfaring (Ingold 2007) – a "type of mobility that is both routine and repetitive" (Hjorth and Pink 2014). Doomscrolling, however, challenges the underlying idea that digital wayfarers are always distracted, inattentive, careless; the practice is characterized precisely by a visceral, concerned, vigorous (even if not always deliberate) engagement with technology. Contrary to the common conception of mobile social media use, doomscrolling is based on an intense frontal attachment to devices and platforms, not on peripheral attentiveness or second-screen-ness. In this regard, the purpose of stream flow-breakers is precisely to interrupt this affect-driven nonstop scrolling.

Furthermore, the posts that I am referring to here as flow-breakers also serve as a manifestation of users' reflexive acknowledgement of the repetitive – often labelled as 'mindless', 'automatic' or 'addictive' – behaviour of their (imagined) readers. Indeed, the now widespread idea of mindlessness – the (partial) lack of conscious awareness of the context in which one's behaviour takes place (Langer 1992, Nass and Moon 2000) – seems very fertile for future theoretical and empirical enquiry on social media engagement. As pointed out by Baym, Wagman and Persaud (2020), the alleged automaticity of habitual engagement with connective platforms can be triggered by particular emotional states or moods, as well as by the very effortlessness or comfort (Beer 2012, 2020) of the manoeuvring of said technologies.

Still, this assumed 'mindless scrolling' notoriously reproduces a cartesian separation between (the actively engaged) body and (the lethargically inert) mind – a binary which is actually foundational to a whole stream of academic theorisations of mobile media-based communication as 'disembodied'. Challenging such

claims, I would rather join authors such as Richardson (2007) and Hjorth (2008), and suggest the conceptualisation of (doom) scrolling as a corporeal and affective practice, which requires certain bodily knowledges (Moores 2015, Markham 2020) and a particular way of inhabiting or dwelling (Moores 2017) pervasive informational spaces that are always in state of becoming.

For the understanding of media 'virality', the aforementioned flow-breakers support the idea that although the content of social media might be characterised by spreadability (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013), the under-arching consumption mechanism of these platforms is still largely reliant on stickiness. Keeping people's eyeballs hooked is a strategy historically employed by television (Williams 2004, Doane 2006), which is now remediated (Bolter and Grusin 2000) by social data-driven platforms. Finally, flow-breakers like the ones exemplified above indicate the possibility of a sense of collective care and shared experience even in media systems that are fundamentally based on individual personalisation and algorithmic recommendation (Kant 2020). As I suggested elsewhere (Lupinacci 2020), social media thrive on the belief that they can offer an access to the world and its happenings that is tailored to our individual interests, while at the same time making us crave the awareness of others who are experiencing the same.

In these times in which the majority of the population is under lockdown, the 'mobility' in mobile social media is less about portability or physical movement and more about the tentative practices of dwelling in platforms that are purposefully animated, agitated, dynamic, and lively (Beer 2019). There is a vibrant motility of affects and moods (Coyne 2016) even when people and their devices are enforcedly stationary – as put by Karppi (2018:18), "On social media it is affect that sets things into motion". With mobile social media, we are promised we have the world in our hands, accessible through only a few taps, swipes, and strokes; yet, as doomscrolling demonstrates, this is often accompanied by a lump in our throats.

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