

## Freedom in Social Media: A Philosophical Review of Communication

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### ABSTRACT

*The rise of social media has significantly impacted human life in the second media era, allowing users to interact and share content while shaping public opinion. This study explores the concept of freedom within the realm of social media and examines its implications for human behavior and decision-making. The research draws on philosophical perspectives, focusing on the dynamics of domination, autonomy-correlation, and cosmopolitanism. It highlights the diversity of meanings attributed to freedom and examines the works of various philosophers, including John Stuart Mill and Franz Magnis Suseno, to explore the balance between rights and duties and the responsibility within freedom. Additionally, Erich Fromm's metaphysical dimensions of freedom are analyzed, emphasizing the intertwined nature of human existence. Fromm's concept of freedom, encompassing economic, intellectual, and moral freedom, is applied to evaluate the extent of freedom within social media in modern societies. The study concludes that modern individuals do not possess unrestricted freedom in social media, with limitations observed in economic rights, intellectual decision-making, and moral responsibility. The findings contribute to the understanding of freedom within the context of social media and its implications for contemporary society.*

**Keywords:** Freedom; Social Media; Philosophy; Communication.

### 1. Introduction

The presence of new media brings significant changes to human life, one of which is due to the characteristics of the new media, especially in the second media era, which is more transformative than the first era (Holmes, 2005). The second era of new media enables humans to connect with others instantly, eliminating the need for minutes or wait times. One of the most popular forms of new media is social media.

Social media is an internet-based platform that allows users to interact with each other. According to Fuchs (2014), social media incorporates tools that enhance users' abilities to share, collaborate, and engage in collective action. Additionally, social media possesses the power to shape public opinion through the dissemination of media messages (Ardianto et al., 2015). In general, social media encompasses three activities: production, consumption, and participation. Users can create and share content, consume content from others, and engage through comments, likes, dislikes, and content sharing (Kasakowskij et al., 2018).

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The facilitation provided by social media for content production and participation distinguishes it from previous conventional media. Prior to the advent of social media, not everyone had the ability to create and distribute content through mass media, nor to provide immediate feedback. Social media has evolved in three stages: initially, information was shared through websites from producers to receivers; subsequently, users could also generate their own content through blogs, forums, and other platforms; finally, users gained the opportunity to comment on various situations or developed information (Turcule, 2014).

The rise of social media, with its opportunities for simultaneous consumption and production, has given birth to a unique culture among its users. Like an uncapped bottle, various posts flood social media platforms, seemingly unstoppable. The boundaries between public and private spaces have blurred, while hierarchies and identities have become increasingly ambiguous. In social media, anyone can voice their opinions and become an expert, although the truth is not always easily verifiable.

The ease and anonymity afforded by social media encourage users to freely express themselves, creating content and commenting on others' posts. Anonymity plays a significant role in shaping users' behavior both online and offline. People exhibit different complexities of shame when communicating anonymously (Pinsonneault and Heppel, 1997; Suler, 2004). In anonymous environments, individuals tend to be more courageous and open in sharing personal information (Correa et al., n.d.).

Given the immense power of social media, concerns about freedom arise. If the existence of social media is no longer avoidable in human life, do individuals still possess the freedom to use or remove it? Freedom, according to philosophers, extends beyond political, economic, or physical aspects, encompassing the fundamental ability to choose freely (Rashid, 1984). Is humanity truly free, in the sense that individuals have the capacity to select among various alternatives when taking action? Or do individuals inherit certain constraints? Hence, the question arises: what is freedom, and is it genuinely unrestricted within the realm of social media?

Saint Augustine, the great philosopher of the Middle Ages, once said that a person usually knows about something when no one asks him about it, but as soon as someone else questions him about that thing, then one no longer knows about it. The words "free" and "freedom" are often pronounced in every society, but when someone is asked to explain their meaning, it becomes a challenging task. What does it truly mean when people say "I am free" or "I have freedom"? How do we interpret phrases like "now free day," "free card," or "free nature"?

Several researchers have conducted studies on freedom, and at least three studies are relevant to this topic. Firstly, H. Abustan (2009) in his study titled "Freedom to Express Opinions for Political Party Members in Indonesia" examines the implementation of freedom of expression and thought among political party members based on the 1945 Basic Act. The dissertation concludes that political party managers, particularly those who are members of the DPR or DPRD, do not possess complete autonomy. They are often "controlled" and fearful of their party leaders.

Secondly, Suyahmo's study (2009) entitled "John Stuart Mill's Freedom Philosophy Relevance for the Development of Human Rights" concludes that, according to Stuart Mill's ontological perspective, substantial freedom is not merely acting based on one's own will or acting without control and limitation, but rather engaging in positive actions that do not harm others and bring benefits to both parties. The dissertation highlights the moral values of the balance between rights and duties advocated by John Stuart Mill, which have been embraced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights since 1948. Suyahmo also emphasizes the development of these moral values in Indonesia.

Thirdly, Kamil's study (2010) titled "Freedom of Judges in the Perspective of Franz Magnis Suseno's Freedom Philosophy and Its Relevance for Judge Development in Indonesia" explores the concept of freedom of judges in Indonesia. The study highlights Magnis-Suseno's philosophy of freedom, which encompasses existential freedom and social freedom while emphasizing the importance of responsibility. It concludes that Indonesian judges understand freedom of judges as the liberty to carry out their essential judicial duties professionally, in accordance with laws and regulations, without interference or pressure from any party.

Unlike previous research, this article aims to delve into how philosophical studies perceive freedom in the context of social media. It provides a more detailed analysis of this topic.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The material for writing this article is derived from research on freedom in social media. To gather the necessary literature, researchers conducted searches in search engines and open-access journals using keywords such as freedom, social media, and philosophy of communication. The collected data was then analyzed using descriptive data analysis techniques, where the data were grouped into categories based on the sub-themes to be addressed.

## **3. Results**

### **Freedom: An Ontological Reflection**

Ontological reflection is an attempt to contemplate reality, specifically the reality of freedom, through fundamental ontological questions. Anton Bakker, in his book "Ontology or General Metaphysics, Philosophy of Hypothesis and Fundamentals of Reality" (1992), presents several fundamental questions relevant to reflecting on the reality of freedom, including the dynamics of domination, autonomy-correlation, and cosmopolitanism.

At the outset of this reflection, a fundamental question arises: Is freedom an entity? The term "freedom" is often used to signify human expression as an independent being. Freedom is inherent in all human behavior and serves as an integral need underlying the journey of self-direction in life. It is also understood as the ability to choose and the opportunity to fulfill or acquire those choices. Freedom is a familiar reality to every human being, an inherent element of human nature. However, difficulties arise when individuals attempt to articulate their experience of freedom at the level of reflection.

Lorens Bagus (2002: 406) explains that freedom is perceived as a state of non-compulsion or determination by external forces, to the extent that it is united with the inherent internal capacity of self-determination. It can also be defined as the ability of an individual to act or refrain from acting based on their own capabilities and choices, being able to act according to their desires or become the cause of their own actions.

The diversity of meanings attributed to freedom often leads to ambiguous interpretations. Maurice Cranston provides an example with the words "free" in French (*libre*) and English (*free*). The inscription "free" on public toilets in France indicates that the toilet is unoccupied, whereas, in the UK, it signifies that there is no charge for using public toilet services (Cranston, 1967: 6-7).

Another example involves the usage of "freedom" in the writings of Lord Acton and J.J. Rousseau. Acton, in his book "History of Freedom" (1976), portrays the history of mankind from a human perspective, emphasizing that freedom is not something already possessed by man by nature but something that must be fought for. Rousseau famously stated in his book "Du Contrat Social": "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (Dister, 1988: 41).

The proliferation of theories and opinions about freedom stems from the complexity of the underlying problems, particularly concerning the highlighted aspects and components of freedom. These diverse opinions, beliefs, and views have indeed enriched and deepened our understanding of the subject. However, given the significant differences and at times contradictory nature of these views, which may only serve to confuse rather than clarify, a comprehensive explanation is necessary to elucidate the true nature of freedom.

In the study of ontology, the question of autonomy primarily concerns the quantity of reality, whether reality functions as a single entity or collectively. Each answer leads to another question regarding autonomy and correlation. When reality is perceived as a single nature, the autonomy of that singular entity must be explained. Conversely, if reality is understood as a nature of interconnectedness, the relationship between different entities must be described. This lies at the core of the autonomy-correlation question in ontology. Moreover, this question of autonomy and correlation becomes relevant to the study of freedom, raising the question of whether freedom is a singular or collective phenomenon. If it is considered unique, the autonomy of that particular freedom must be explained. If it is understood as a shared nature, its relationship with other freedoms must also be elucidated.

One of the philosophers who addressed the issue of freedom was Erich Fromm. This social scientist, born in the 1900s, brought forth numerous new perspectives on freedom. Studying the metaphysical dimensions of Fromm's concept of freedom is not an easy task as he does not explicitly delve into the ontological foundations of freedom. Nevertheless, it is evident that Fromm was heavily influenced by existentialism, and one aspect that emerges from his thinking is the notion that human existence is intertwined with the existence of other human beings. This does not imply that freedom, according to Fromm, is solely correlative, as it should be noted that freedom, in Fromm's view, encompasses both positive (freedom to) and negative (freedom from) aspects. This duality reflects Fromm's understanding of autonomy in relation to freedom. On one hand, Fromm argues that human freedom is greatly influenced by external conditions (correlative nature), but on the other hand, he emphasizes that human freedom is oriented towards positive directions (freedom for).

The dual nature of Fromm's perspective on freedom, as interpreted by the author, does not provide a definitive answer to the question of autonomy-correlation in freedom. For the author, there remains one viewpoint that guides Fromm's understanding of the autonomous correlation of freedom. To clarify this viewpoint, it is necessary to differentiate between two realms in Fromm's conception of the autonomy of freedom: the realm of factuality and the realm of ideality. The realm of factuality pertains to Fromm's perspective on the reality of human freedom, while the realm of ideality is related to his vision of how human freedom ought to be. These two aspects need to be distinguished because Fromm exhibits distinct attitudes when considering human freedom within each domain.

In terms of the reality of human freedom, Fromm was strongly influenced by the existentialist view that recognizes human existence as inherently relational, with individuals being interconnected. This notion holds significant implications since understanding human existence as interdependent on others while acknowledging individual freedom implies that human freedom is correlative. This idea is reflected in Fromm's assertion that human freedom is greatly influenced by external factors such as economic, social, and political conditions. As mentioned earlier, Fromm contends that freedom is the orientation of the structure of human existence, achieved through assimilating objects and establishing relationships with oneself and others. This suggests that freedom is profoundly influenced by various factors, both external and internal, thereby making it essentially correlative or at the very least, relational. In essence, freedom does not arise autonomously without the influence of other elements.

In his work "The Sane Society," Erich Fromm (Bambang Murtianto, 1995: 359-360) asserts that genuine freedom must encompass three conditions: economic freedom, intellectual

freedom, and moral freedom. Economic freedom entails individuals having the right to engage in work that is not alienating, absolute entitlement to the fruits of their labor, and the ability to freely participate in work. Intellectual freedom implies that an individual is genuinely free only if they can make choices, and they can only make choices if they possess sufficient knowledge to make informed comparisons. Moral freedom, on the other hand, signifies that true freedom cannot be attained if one is enslaved by their instincts; it can only be achieved by embracing an ideal and philosophical attitude that enables coherent decision-making in one's life. Furthermore, Fromm (1955: 360) adds that one should not deliberately pursue economic and intellectual freedom in ways that contradict the ethical principles of the community. Moral freedom is found only in voluntary acceptance and adherence to the ethical standards of the group.

The three freedom conditions proposed by Fromm can also be applied to examine the extent of freedom in social media within today's modern society. Do modern societies exhibit economic freedom, intellectual freedom, and moral freedom in the realm of social media?

#### **4. Discussion**

##### **Social Media in Modern Life**

Social media has become an integral part of modern human life. In fact, it has introduced a phenomenon known as FoMO (Fear of Missing Out) which refers to the fear of missing out on something. FoMO symptoms manifest as the tendency of social media users to frequently and continuously check their social media, even in the absence of new information or notifications. The anxiety induced by FoMO symptoms compels modern individuals to constantly seek connection with their surroundings in order to avoid missing out on any moment. Those experiencing FoMO always desire to know what others are doing (Deniz, 2021).

In addition to the constant need for connection, modern individuals also strive to assert their presence to others, exemplified by the phrase "I'm online, therefore I exist." In doing so, they consistently update others about their experiences. This phenomenon highlights the social self-efficacy that social media provides to its users. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to participate in social tasks and maintain interpersonal relationships in social life (Deniz, 2021).

Deniz's viewpoint regarding social media as a source of self-efficacy is supported by previous research on the use of social media on smartphones by urban women. The study revealed that women utilize social media not only to express their existence but also to negotiate their identity, escape from everyday problems, and engage in social and political activities within society (Setiansah, 2015). Thus, it can be concluded that in modern human life, social media serves not only as a means to obtain information but also as a platform to resist, negotiate, and attain various forms of freedom. In this context, it is evident that social media, as a technological advancement, has shaped a new cultural landscape within society.

Social media has transformed the boundaries between public and private spaces. It has also provided a platform for the development and discussion of various political issues. Scholars and philosophers have recognized that the presence of technology, including social media, empowers its users from different perspectives. Some researchers, influenced by Marxism or Foucault, argue that power is intertwined with technological proficiency. Feenberg, drawing from the ideas of Marcuse and Heidegger, has even developed a critical theory of technology that helps us understand how technology shapes society (Coeckelbergh, 2018).

##### **Freedom in Social Media: A Review from a Communication Philosophy Perspective**

As mentioned earlier, social media empowers its users not only as consumers but also as producers of content. Social media grants freedom and opportunities for individuals to participate in various societal issues. However, the question remains: Do modern

individuals truly possess the freedom to utilize all the opportunities that social media offers? This article will further explore the concept of media freedom from the perspective of communication philosophy, employing Erich Fromm's ideas on freedom.

Fromm's concept of freedom is inherent to modern individuals, as concluded by Caliguirri (1966:32) who stated that freedom, in Fromm's view, is "the problem of human nature." Fromm specifically addresses modern humans, referring to individuals residing within a modern culture characterized by constant change, influenced by various factors such as economics, politics, and culture. In his book "Beyond Chains of Illusion" (1990:87), Fromm states:

The social process can be understood only we start out the knowledge of the reality of man, his psychic properties as well as psychological ones, and if examine the interaction between the nature of man and the external condition under which he lives and which he has to master if he is to survive.

For Fromm, the problem of freedom is inherent in human existence throughout history and changes in accordance with the changes in the structure of human character resulting from the individual's response to their social situation. In explaining his conception of freedom, Fromm also arrives at an understanding of the circumstances under which human freedom is acquired. This is where the most significant difference between Fromm and other thinkers, who also explore the theme of freedom, lies. Authentic freedom emerges when the instinctual bonds begin to dissolve, and simultaneously, self-consciousness arises as an individual who is not entirely determined by pre-individualistic bonds, instincts, or other primal connections. Freedom also arises when consciousness as an individual is born, which occurs when Adam disobeys the Lord's command and eats the "fruit of knowledge," resulting in his expulsion from heaven. In explaining freedom, Fromm also distinguishes between two types of liberty: negative liberty and positive liberty, as well as two meanings: as the orientation of character structure and as the ability to choose. Fromm further argues that in every sense of freedom, there is always a paradox, meaning that when one attains freedom, they are simultaneously confronted with a situation of alienation, anxiety, and insecurity.

Fromm (as quoted in Murtianto, 1995: 359-360) states that true freedom must encompass three conditions: economic freedom, intellectual freedom, and moral freedom. In the context of social media usage, economic freedom can be measured by the extent to which modern individuals have the right to engage in activities on social media, the absolute right to the results of their work, and the freedom to be part of their work without limitations. For example, all social media users, such as those on Instagram, have the right to produce commercial content and are entitled to obtain fair compensation for their work without restrictions from any party. An interesting topic to discuss in the context of economic freedom on social media is the phenomenon of digital slavery (Rogerson, 2007). Digital slavery occurs when media users voluntarily produce content and provide various data and information, including personal data, to media owners. This data becomes part of big data, which is no longer fully under the control of social media account owners but is controlled by the platform owners.

Furthermore, intellectual freedom in social media can be assessed based on the freedom that users have to make choices, contingent upon their level of knowledge to make informed comparisons. A social media user is said to have intellectual freedom when they can choose from the available alternatives on social media, and their choices are based on sufficient knowledge. This knowledge should be adequate to enable them to make informed decisions. For instance, a supporter of a presidential candidate could exercise their choice to produce content on social media about the candidate as long as it is supported by accurate facts about the candidate.

Lastly, moral freedom on social media implies that users cannot truly be free if they are enslaved by their instinctual impulses. For example, the impulse to insult, harm, or malign

others through the content they create or the comments they make on others' posts. Social media users can experience moral freedom if they possess an ideal and philosophical attitude that enables them to engage in coherent and ethical activities in their lives. Fromm (1955: 360) emphasizes that one should not employ means contrary to the ethical standards of the community in order to expedite the achievement of economic and intellectual freedom. In the context of social media, content creators are often found engaging in bullying, gossip, embarrassment, or exploiting others for personal gain, solely concerned with the number of viewers their content receives. An interesting example is the case of Baim Wong and Paula, who made false reports of domestic violence to the police for the purpose of content creation. According to Fromm, moral freedom can only be attained through strict adherence to the ethical principles of the community.

## 5. Conclusions

Modern individuals who utilize social media do not possess unlimited freedom. Employing Erich Fromm's freedom indicators, it can be argued that social media users do not truly have economic freedom. Once the content they produce becomes part of the big data, social media users no longer have full control over the outcomes of their work on social media. Intellectual freedom on social media is contingent upon users having sufficient knowledge to make informed choices regarding their consumption, production, and participation on the platform. Moreover, modern individuals are said to possess moral freedom when they abide by and respect the boundaries of freedom within the societal group that surrounds them.

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