

Taking Back Control: How to Confront and Overcome the Challenges of Social Media

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In 1934, T.S. Eliot wrote, “Where is the Life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” (1970, p. 147). Today, it is harder than ever to draw knowledge from our vast stores of information and to distill our knowledge into true wisdom. Sometimes, it seems like enormous tech companies control our access to information, our political discourse, our economic decisions, and our mental well-being. But with careful consideration of how social media operates, we can overcome big tech companies’ far-reaching influence by using social media with more discernment.

Social media has benefitted our society in many ways. The Internet allows us to create and store massive amounts of data, and the rise of social media has enabled every individual user to create information and share it widely. Platforms like Twitter have democratized civil discourse by enabling any person to publicize his opinions and ideas, and platforms like Facebook allow users to maintain contact with family, friends, and colleagues, even when separated by great distances. Across the Internet, people are finding meaningful communities and contributing to important causes.

In the early days of the Internet, the prospect of benefits like these caused an idealistic vision of what the world would become once everyone was connected online. Singer and Brooking quote Twitter cofounder Evan Williams, “I thought once everybody could speak freely and exchange information and ideas, the world [was] automatically going to be a better place” (2018, p. 19). Like Williams, many people imagined the Internet and social media would enrich people’s lives, facilitate free speech for all, and help democracy sweep across the globe. We now

know these utopian predictions were unrealistic. Social media has also been used to livestream terrorist attacks, to obstruct democratic elections, and to drive teenagers to suicide. The Internet has exponentially multiplied our data and information, but whether it will enrich our knowledge and wisdom remains to be seen.

We can never return to a pre-Internet world, but neither can we afford to let the Internet shape our world without cautious consideration. A full understanding of social media's effects, both positive and negative, demands inspection of its underlying business model. Social media services are typically free to users, so tech companies rely on advertising for revenue. Social media companies have two mechanisms to increase this revenue stream: maximizing the effectiveness of each advertisement to change the user's behavior and increasing the number of advertisements to which users are exposed by keeping them on the platform for as much time as possible.

The key to social media's effectiveness in advertising is targeting advertisements to specific users. Social media corporations employ sophisticated algorithms which track every user's actions, create detailed personality profiles for each user, and select which advertisements will most effectively alter each user's behavior. Shoshana Zuboff, professor emeritus at Harvard Business School, terms this system "surveillance capitalism" (2019). She writes, "With a new generation of research tools [Facebook] learned to plunder your 'self' right through to your most intimate core" (Zuboff, 2019, pp. 270-271). Most people have experienced this phenomenon at a basic level. They might search Google for a product or service, then notice an advertisement for the same product appear on their Facebook page.

The extent of targeted advertising on social media goes far beyond this rudimentary example, though. Zuboff explains:

“We are not scrutinized for substance but for form...It is not what is in your sentences but in their length and complexity, not *what* you list but *that* you list, not the picture but the choice of filter and degree of saturation, not *what* you disclose but how you share or fail to, not *where* you make plans to see your friends but *how* you do so: a casual ‘later’ or a precise time and place?” (2019, p. 274)

Data *about* a user’s activity on social media is so effective because it is almost impossible for the user to withhold or manipulate. A user trying to protect his privacy could choose not to post certain information, but even this restraint will be noticed by the algorithms and used to devise advertisements to which the user is even more susceptible. Targeted social media advertising is dangerous because it enables social media companies to unobtrusively shape users’ behavior without their knowledge.

The other way social media corporations boost advertising revenue is keeping users glued to their platforms for as long as possible. They have been especially effective in catering to the psychological vulnerabilities of young people. Adolescents are dependent on their peers for social approval; they are still developing their individual identity as distinct from the surrounding group (Erikson, 1963, pp. 261-263). Social media captivates so many young people because it quantifies in terms of their “likes” and “friends” how well they satisfy their desire to belong. This accords social media corporations not only more revenue, but also more influence over how users think and feel.

The development of echo chambers reveals another danger of social media. Singer and Brooking argue that echo chambers emerge because of people’s tendency toward confirmation bias: “The real source of these digital echo chambers is again deeply rooted in the human brain. Put simply, people like to be right; they *hate* to be proven wrong” (2018, p. 125). Klein adds that

echo chambers provide a safe community which reinforces the user's preexisting views (2020, p. 158). Tightly-knit online communities—from flat-earthers to the alt-right to ISIS terrorists—have flourished through social media's ability to bring together interested people and surround them with content that supports their views. By handicapping our ability to think critically, echo chambers have prevented the Internet from becoming a place of robust civil discourse.

Then again, it is easy to overstate the effects of echo chambers. Users rarely exist in such a tightly sealed online bubble that they have no exposure to opposing views. In fact, Stephens-Davidowitz argues that people are more likely to encounter opposing views online than in their everyday offline lives. He summarizes:

“The average liberal may spend her mornings with her liberal husband and liberal kids; her afternoon with her liberal coworkers; her commute surrounded by liberal bumper stickers; her evening with her liberal yoga classmates. When she comes home and peruses a few conservative comments on cnn.com or gets a Facebook link from her Republican high school acquaintance, this may be her highest conservative exposure of the day.” (2017, pp. 144-145)

The danger of echo chambers is not absolute lack of exposure to opposing views, but the way we respond when we do encounter them. Instead of sincerely considering the reasoning behind opposing views, we often become even more resistant to them. Much of the outrage online is due to human's psychological aversion to being proven wrong, combined with social media's ability to connect us with people who confirm our existing views.

What can we do about all these challenges social media presents? How can we engage the online world with more wisdom? The first step is awareness of the dangers. When we use

social media, we must remember that the platform's business model relies on captivating our attention for as long as possible and manipulating our behavior with targeted advertising. We should be mindful of our cognitive biases and preconceptions when we interact with others online. We should recognize how online content provokes certain emotional impulses. As we become more self-aware of our online habits and how social media affects us, we can begin to resist in simple, common-sense ways. We can be slower to share extreme content, get out of our echo chambers, and intentionally seek out perspectives that balance our cognitive biases. We can create boundaries for our social media use and invest in offline hobbies and relationships. Simple steps like these can help social media users take back control of our decision-making and emotional well-being.

Social media itself is neither good nor bad. Rather, social media is a neutral medium which reveals the good and the bad of the people who operate and use it. Social media shows that we are social beings who depend upon each other for approval; we resist information that contradicts our current assumptions; we are capable of both incredible good and gut-wrenching evil. Social media can seem like a vast, amorphous force no one can control, but it is nothing more than the collective creation of its designers, moderators, and users. Social media is a double-edged sword, that is continually being redirected with every post, view, and share. It is up to each of us to use this tool for good.

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