

HOW HAVE SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS CHANGED THE WAY WE INTERACT?

Social media algorithms, in their commonly known form, are now 15 years old. They were born with Facebook's introduction of ranked, personalised news feeds and have transformed how we interact online.

And like many teenagers, they pose a challenge to grown-ups who hope to curb their excesses. It's not for want of trying. This year alone, governments around the world have attempted to limit the impacts of harmful content and disinformation on social media – effects that are amplified by algorithms. [...]

Algorithms can watch our behaviour and determine what millions of us see when we log on – and, for some, it is algorithms that have disrupted the free exchange of ideas possible on the internet when it was first created.

"In its early days, social media did function as a kind of digital public sphere, with speech flowing freely," Kai Riemer and Sandra Peter, professors at the University of Sydney Business School, tell the BBC. However, "algorithms on social media platforms have fundamentally reshaped the nature of free speech, not necessarily by restricting what can be said, but by determining who gets to see what content", argue Riemer and Peter. [...]

Because contentious posts are more likely to be rewarded by algorithms, there is the possibility that the fringes of political opinion can be overrepresented on social media. Rather than free and open public forums, critics argue that social media instead offers a distorted and sensationalised mirror of public sentiment that exaggerates discord and muffles the views of the majority.

So while social media platforms accuse governments of threatening free speech, is it the case that their own algorithms might also inadvertently pose a threat? "Recommendation engines are not blocking content – instead it is the community guidelines that restrict freedom of speech, according to the platform's preference," Theo Bertram, the former vice president of public policy at TikTok, tells the BBC. [...]

Our era has been labelled "the algorithmic society" – one in which, it could be argued, social media platforms and search engines govern speech in the same way nation states once did. [...]

What, then, is the solution? Could modest tweaks to the algorithms cultivate more inclusive conversations that more closely resemble the ones we have in person? [...]

There are signs that as social media algorithms move towards maturity, their future could not be in the hands of big tech, nor politicians, but with the people. According to a recent survey, just 28% of Americans say they like documenting their life in public online, down from 40% in 2020. People are instead becoming more comfortable in closed-off group chats with trusted friends and relatives; spaces with more accountability and fewer rewards for shocks and provocations. [...]

Adapted from *bbc.com*
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HOW TECH CREATED A 'RECIPE FOR LONELINESS'

Over the summer, Laura Marciano, a researcher at Harvard, interviewed 500 teenagers for a continuing study investigating the link between technology and loneliness. The results were striking.

For several weeks, the teenagers, who were recruited with the help of Instagram influencers, answered a questionnaire three times a day about their social interactions. Each time, more than 50 percent said they had not spoken to anyone in the last hour, either in person or online.

To put it another way, even though the teenagers were on break from school and spending plenty of time on social media apps, most of them were not socializing at all.

Americans now spend more time alone, have fewer close friendships and feel more socially detached from their communities than they did 20 years ago. One in two adults reports experiencing loneliness, the physiological distress that people endure from social isolation. The nation's surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, declared loneliness an epidemic late last year.

Ever since, scholars and psychologists have accelerated research into whether technology is contributing. The rise of smartphones and social networking apps has forever changed social norms around how we communicate. More personable interactions like phone calls have been superseded by text messages. When people broadcast their lives on TikTok and Instagram, they may not be representing themselves in a genuine way.

"It's hard to know who's being real online, and it's hard for people to be themselves online, and that is a recipe for loneliness," Dr. Murthy said in an interview. He concluded that loneliness had become an epidemic after reviewing scientific studies and speaking with college students last year, he said. [...]

The consensus among scholars was clear: While there was little proof that tech directly made people lonely [...], there was a strong correlation between the two, meaning that those who reported feeling lonely might be using tech in unhealthy ways.

The correlation was rooted in three main behaviors:

On social media apps like Instagram, many fell into the trap of comparing themselves with others and feeling that they were lagging behind their peers.

Text messaging, by far the most popular form of digital communication, could be creating a barrier to authentic connection. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, some people who felt lonely also exhibited addictive personalities – in this case, to streaming videos – that kept them indoors. [...]

People with mental health problems may engage in binge-watching as a coping mechanism for stress and other negative emotions, a Yale professor engaged in the review said. There are also obvious consequences to physical health that can harm mental health: being sedentary for too long, losing sleep and not going out to engage with others.

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IF YOU LET GOOGLE HAVE YOUR DATA, WHY NOT THE NHS?

The government will need to intrude into people's lives more than ever to cope with spiralling demands on the state's finances. In the transition to greener technologies, the need to track who is emitting carbon and where they are doing it will only intensify.

Last week's announcement by the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, that he is employing more people to monitor cars coming into the ultra-low emission zone to make sure they are fined is another example of big brotherism that his counterpart in Manchester, Mister Burnham, decided Mancunians would not allow.

The tracking of Britain's vehicles is a matter for agonising discussions among Whitehall officials, who want to oversee a switch to electric cars, but know that if they are successful much of the £25bn paid each year in fuel tax, and the 20% slice of VAT applied to fuel sales, will be lost.

When electric cars dominate, the chancellor will need to find an alternative source of income, and that may have to come from the satellite surveillance of zero-emission vehicles, and not just in London. If this direction of travel is inevitable, the 7p a litre increase in fuel duty expected in the budget in October could be a last hurrah.

The same imperative applies to the efficient use of public services, which is another troubling subject for civil servants. They want to reform the way services are delivered and welfare is paid against the wishes of large minorities that object to, or want to avoid, state surveillance.

Health secretary Wes Streeting needs everyone to have a smartphone and the NHS app to streamline services that are costly when provided in the analogue world. Streeting is also wrestling with acute staff shortages, and better use of technology will help him overcome that. If UK households offer their information to the NHS in the way they do to Google or others, health service provision could be cheaper and more effective. And the health service could be a testbed for a national ID card that allows for the digitisation of more areas of government, reducing costs and tackling fraud.

Keir Starmer has shied away from a discussion about the impact of digital communications on a population that treasures a (false) sense of liberty from fending off government intrusion. [...] What would help would be a government that made more of an attempt to both promote the state as a worthy and safe recipient of individuals' digital information, and mounted a defence against data intrusion by the private sector. [...] At the moment we are drifting into an era when we allow private sector control while shunning government attempts to navigate a digital future.

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