



Would a reboot make social media a nicer place?

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One of the most popular cures for an ailing computer or Hollywood movie franchise is a reboot. It also could be what's needed to wring the toxic features from today's social media scene.

That's what the [Institute for Rebooting Social Media](#) proposes to do over the next three years. The institute, an initiative of Harvard University's Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society, is being funded with \$2m (£1.5m) from the John S. and John L. Knight Foundation, as well as Craig Newmark Philanthropies.

"While the identification of problems may vary, it's hard to find anyone defending the current environment of social media," says Berkman co-founder Jonathan Zittrain.

"It's important to better assess and make known how social media is evolving, to appreciate the choices that are available for how it might be configured, and to canvass new and interesting emerging platforms apart from the shadow of the incumbents," he explains.

According to the Berkman Center, social media is broken. Platforms initially perceived as engines for democracy and truth-telling appear to have facilitated the spread and acceptance of lies, division, and physical harm.

Recently, for example, social media was used to fuel the use of ivermectin, a drug used to deworm livestock and which the FDA warns can be very dangerous to humans, as a Covid-19 treatment.

The Berkman Center also notes that social media has contributed to the decay in confidence in institutions, elections, and collective truth and the growth of racial, ethnic, political, religious, and gender-based animosities.

What's more, it says that design and policy decisions by social media platforms have permitted and even encouraged this state of affairs, while the actions of a handful of private entities can influence the shape of public communication in unprecedented ways.

"When social media started, it was supposed to bring about this new renaissance of thought because everyone would have a voice. Clearly, something is off," observes Mitchell Marovitz, director of the communications, journalism, and speech program at the University of Maryland Global Campus.

Despite its warts, social media and online environments have their benefits, too. For example, social media enables access to vast amounts of knowledge, valuable self-governed communities, and flourishing cultural movements. Part of the new institute's work will be to preserve and strengthen the benefits of online communication, while minimizing its harmful aspects.

"There is a consensus, even among people who run social media companies, that there are growing problems with the way we interact and communicate and share information online," says Ashley Johnson, a policy analyst at the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, a research and public policy organization.

"Any time you get together millions of people, you're going to amplify the best in people, and you're going to amplify the worst in people," she continues. "We've definitely seen that, and we haven't figured out how to maximize the good and minimize the bad. That's what I think of when I hear reboot social media."

The scale of social media will make reforming it difficult. "It's not as easy as saying there's a problem at a company, let's figure out how to change its culture," says Karen Kovacs North, director of the Annenberg Program on Online Communities at the University of Southern California.

While social media has some societal benefits, it can have some very harmful effects on people, maintains John Carroll, a media analyst and journalist based in Boston. "In many ways, it's structured to exploit people's weaknesses and opportunistic in maximizing its own use," he says. "The gamification and addictive response of social media is something that's really hard to disrupt."

Current social media has a tendency to exaggerate differences in people, to outrage people, and to radicalize people, explains Craig Newmark, founder of Craig's List and Craig Newmark Philanthropies. "That's part of the business model in many cases," he says. "We need social media where people listen to each other, where they can find common ground, and work together."

Multi-disciplinary Approach

Working together is also baked into the new institute's design. It will be using a multi-disciplinary approach, corralling participants across industry, government, civil society, and academia, to build a portfolio of research, projects, programming, and educational opportunities to improve the digital social space.

"Online services are like hydras, if you fix one problem, another one often emerges," James Mickens, a professor of computer science at Harvard, explains in a statement. Mr. Mickens, Mr. Zittrain, and George Bemis, a professor of international law and professor of computer science at Harvard, will be leading the institute.

While potential regulatory cures have been put forward as solutions for what ails social media, Mr Mikens maintains regulation is only part of the cocktail needed to address the problem.

"Part of the challenge is that many of the problems are multifaceted," he explains. "They're not just engineering problems, and they're not just regulatory issues, and they can't be solved merely by leveraging insights from social science."

John Sands, director of learning and impact at the Knight Foundation, says that the institute can create a space for extended engagement by people from a variety of backgrounds.

"Normally the folks who need to discuss these issues and hash out solutions are only together a day or two at conferences," he explains. "This institute offers an opportunity for extended engagement."

An interdisciplinary approach is needed if some progress is going to be made in the social media space, maintains Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a public policy think tank. "It requires an interdisciplinary approach because it's not really, or at least not just, social media that's broken," he says. "It's human psychology, and social institutions, and the broader media ecosystem."

"There's a lot that social media platforms could do better," he continues, "but there are also some harms that may just be intrinsic to connecting large groups of humans."

"It can be tempting to say these harms must be the fault of some nefarious algorithm," he notes, "both because it's easier to fix and because it sounds more pleasant than acknowledging there are some inherently ugly aspects of human nature, but I suspect the fundamental problem is on the other side of the screen."

"None of that's to say it's useless to try to mitigate these harms by trying to develop better social media policies," Mr Sanchez adds, "but I think we ought to be realistic about how much good is ultimately going to be accomplished that way."

Mr Carroll maintains that the biggest challenge for initiatives like the reboot project is to break through to the public at large.

These groups can come up with tools, approaches, and habits that could help people—if they reach them," he says. "But the reach of a technology center at Harvard University is pretty limited in the overall scope of things."

"They have laudable objectives," he adds. "The only question is how realistic are they?"