



Can social networks be ‘restarted’ to become less toxic?

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One of the most popular ways to improve the functioning of a locked computer is to press a button and reset everything. Some people hope that a reboot could also be a remedy to solve the problems generated by social media.

That’s what the Institute for Rebooting Social Media, created this year, intends to do over the next three years.

The academic institute, a new initiative of Harvard University’s Berkman Klein Center for the Internet & Society (BKCIS), has funding of \$2 million (about R\$ 10 million) from various philanthropic and research foundations, such as the The John S. and Craig Newmark Philanthropies Foundation.

“While the identification of issues can vary, it’s hard to find someone championing the current social media environment,” says Jonathan Zittrain, co-founder of BKCIS.

“It is important to assess and better understand the evolution of social networks,” he says, who advocates a complete overhaul of the platforms.

According to the BKCIS analysis, social networks no longer serve the purpose for which they were created..

Platforms were initially advertised as engines of democracy and the dissemination of truth. However, now they are seen in the opposite way: they facilitate the spread of lies, the division between people, in addition to causing physical and psychological harm to users.

- Facebook, Google and Twitter criticize interim measure limiting removal of content on social networks
- MP may be considered unconstitutional, experts say

In a recent example, social media has been used to encourage the use of ivermectin and chloroquine as drugs to treat Covid-19, although there is no scientific evidence that they work.

BKCIS experts also say that social media has contributed to the decay of trust in institutions, negatively influenced the elections of several countries and helped in the growth of racial, ethnic, political, religious and gender animosities.

“When social media first emerged, they served to stimulate thought, because everyone in theory would have a voice. But clearly something is wrong,” says Mitchell Marovitz, director of the communication, journalism, and speech program at the University of Maryland, USA United.

Despite their shortcomings, social media and online environments have clear benefits that are also worth preserving.

There is no doubt that platforms, for example, increase access to vast amounts of knowledge, create valuable self-managed communities, and stimulate important cultural movements.

- Twitter announces ‘communities’ feature, which creates groups on the social network
- TikTok surpasses YouTube in average viewing time in US and UK
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Part of the new institute’s work will be to strengthen these benefits of online communication., while trying to minimize its harmful parts.

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

“Whenever you bring millions or people together, you’re going to amplify the best in them, but also the worst in them,” she continues.

We need to build on the good part of social media, says Ashley Johnson, policy analyst at the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation. — Photo: Thomas White/Reuters

“We’ve definitely seen this movement and haven’t figured out how to maximize what’s good and minimize what’s bad. That’s what I think about when I hear the phrase ‘social media needs to restart.’

However, the scale and reach of social media will make this reform very difficult.

“It’s not as easy as saying there’s a problem in a company and we’re going to figure out how to change its culture,” says Karen Kovacs North, director of the Annenberg Program in Online Communities at the University of Southern California.

“While social media has some benefits for people, platforms can have some very detrimental effects,” says John Carroll, a media analyst and journalist based in Boston, USA.

“In many ways, they are structured to exploit people’s weaknesses and are opportunistic to maximize their own use,” he says. “Gamification and screen addiction is really hard to stop.”

“Social media tends to highlight differences between people and cause outrage and radicalization,” says Craig Newmark, founder of Craig’s List and Craig Newmark Philanthropies.

“This is part of the business model in many cases,” he adds. “We need places where people listen to each other, where they can find consensus and work together.”

The architects of the Harvard project say that a collaboration system is built into the design of the new institute. It will use a multidisciplinary approach, bringing together participants from 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 comes up,” explains James Mickens, a professor of computer science at Harvard. Mickens will join Zittrain in leading the new institute.

“Part of the challenge is that a lot of the problems are multifaceted,” he explains.

“It’s not just engineering issues and it’s not just regulatory issues,” says Mickens.

John Sands, the Knight Foundation’s director of learning and impact, hopes the institute can create a space for deeper discussions among people of diverse backgrounds.

“Usually, people who need to discuss and find solutions stay together [por] a day or two at the conferences,” he explains. “This institute offers an opportunity for extended involvement.”

Social media needs to find more consensus among people, says Craig Newmark, founder of Craig’s List. — Photo: Alessandro Feitosa Jr/G1

An interdisciplinary approach is needed if any progress is to be made in the social media space, believes Julian Sanchez, senior researcher 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 isn’t working,” he says. “It’s human psychology, institutions, and the broader media ecosystem.”

“There are many things platforms could do better,” he continues, “but there is also some harm that can be intrinsic to connecting large groups of human beings.”

“It might be tempting to say that this damage must be the fault of some nefarious algorithm,” he notes, “both because it’s easier to fix and because it feels more pleasant than recognizing that

there are some inherently bad aspects of human nature. the fundamental problem is on the other side of the screen.”

“That’s not to say it’s futile to try to mitigate this damage by trying to develop better social media policies, but I think we have to be realistic,” adds Sanchez.

Carroll says the biggest challenge for initiatives like the reboot project is reaching the general public.

“These research groups can create tools, approaches and habits that can help people,” he says. “But the reach of a technology center at Harvard University is pretty limited in the general scope of things.”

“They have commendable goals,” he adds. “The only question is how realistic are they?”