



Stop Saying Social Media 'Addiction'

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Recently, the CEOs of Facebook and Twitter came before the Senate Intelligence Committee, which held hearings on attempts by foreign adversaries to use social media to manipulate elections, proliferate "fake news," and sow discord among Americans. Senators also brought up the issue of social media addiction. There are fears that manipulative efforts by malevolent hackers might have greater impact on people whose addiction compels them to face constant exposure to this content.

But the American Psychiatric Society does not consider "social media addiction" also called "internet addiction disorder" to be a behavioral disorder. In the current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* it's listed as a "condition for further study." Researchers have yet to approach a consensus as to whether perceived excessive time spent on the internet and engaged with internet-based social media is an addictive behavioral disorder. One of the leading researchers on the subject stresses that most reports on the phenomenon are anecdotal and peer-reviewed scientific research is scarce. As a result, most "internet addiction" rehab programs in the U.S. are not covered by health insurance.

The public perception that social media is addictive is no small matter. Legacy media is threatened by the "creative destruction" they face from social media platforms that bypass them to provide access to news and viewpoints that might not otherwise get through their gates. In the U.K., for example, where freedom of speech is not constitutionally guaranteed, media companies are urging the government to intervene to "counteract all potential online harms, many of which are exacerbated by social media." Politicians are motivated to regulate social media platforms to protect the integrity of the election process, but also to assure that their political positions are presented in what they consider to be the "proper light" and are not misrepresented. These examples of privilege-seeking are nothing new.

But regulation of the internet and social media content has serious implications for freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of association. In some countries, tech companies have collaborated with the government in efforts at social conditioning. Last year police in Berlin raided the homes of 36 people accused of "hateful postings" on social media. German law

prohibits a range of postings with punishments of up to 5 years in prison for inciting racial hatred.

The U.S. Constitution stands in the way of laws like those in many European Union countries. So do American sensibilities. But those cultural sensibilities might be changing as younger people appear more open to limitations on speech deemed "hateful." Right now it is difficult to imagine the public supportive of such interventions.

But the fear of addiction to social media might conceivably reach the level of today's fear of addiction to opioids. It is not a stretch to see social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook demonized as purveyors of addictive content, making them as unsympathetic as the opioid pharmaceutical companies or "Big Tobacco." If this happens, resistance to intrusive regulations of internet content will erode.

The American Society of Addiction Medicine defines addiction as "chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry ... characterized by the inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, [and] craving" that continues despite the resulting destruction of relationships, economic conditions, and health. Addiction has a biopsychosocial basis with a genetic predisposition and involves neurotransmitters and interactions within reward centers of the brain. The interaction of these factors has not been established with respect to social media use.

In a recent Pew study, a majority of users overall stated it would not be difficult to give up visiting social media sites, although among those younger than 24, 51% stated it would be difficult. In another survey of Facebook users, 42% said they had taken a break from the platform for several weeks or more, and 26% had deleted the Facebook cell phone app altogether.

While excessive time on the internet and social media has been correlated with depression and even suicide, causation has not been established.

It is not nitpicking to push back on talk of social media addiction. Medical professionals should correct, not enable politicians and pundits when they misspeak.

Before people see their rights infringed or are otherwise harmed by unintended consequences, it would do us all a great deal of good to be more accurate and precise in our terminology. It would also help if policymakers knew more about the matters on which they create policy.

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