



Is social media the scourge of democracy, or is it us?

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Are the social media destroying our democracy, our discourse, our mental health, and America itself?

We have all heard the arguments — usually, via social media. Online platforms dumb down discourse by breaking it into snippets easily taken out of context. (Twitter, the preferred online habitat of journalists and political activists, gets named as a particularly egregious offender.) They enable rampant misinformation impossible to control. They make us nastier by encouraging us to insult and demean others — distant and invisible — in a way most of us would never do face-to-face. They get us addicted to both outrage and positive feedback. The result is more polarization, more hostility, and more extreme opinions.

There is no question that new media — whether cheap printing in the 18th century, radio and television in the 20th, or the internet in the late 20th and 21st — can profoundly affect society for both good and ill. Complaints about the dumbing-down of public discourse were made about television's "sound bites," talk radio's political shock jocks, and the early internet's blogs and forums.

Social media with a mass audience — Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Reddit — have certainly changed the way we interact. For one, we know a lot more about friends' and relatives' opinions of politics, social issues, and other things once largely off-limits for polite conversation. That means vast new opportunities to get mad at people.

The internet, and especially social media, have amplified a wide range of voices often left out of more traditional venues. However, that includes not only members of minority groups and people experiencing injustice and adversity, but trolls, harassers, smear peddlers, and conspiracy theorists.

The effects are difficult to gauge. Do more people hold extreme or paranoid beliefs than before, or are we just getting more exposure to crazy views that stayed mostly hidden in the past?

The recent growth of political polarization, partisanship, and hate is unquestionable; but even here, social media's role is far from clear. Data from the Pew Research Center shows that from 2016 to 2019, Republicans and Democrats became much more hostile toward each other: The share of people with a negative opinion of the other party surged from 56% to 79% among Democrats and from 58% to 83% among Republicans. But blame Twitter and Facebook? Not necessarily: Older survey data shows that partisan negativity began to grow in the 1970s, with big leaps in the 1990s and the early 2000s.

Social media users are not helpless pawns. Online platforms can be weaponized for mobbing or mobilized for assisting those in need. Online discussions can be dialogues or echo chambers.

Yes, Twitter features in particular make it easy to trade hit-and-run insults or circulate other people's tweets out of context. But doing so is still a choice. Journalists, too, make a choice when giving vastly disproportionate weight to social media posts and treating handfuls of tweets as a cross-section of public opinion. With new CNN head Chris Licht getting off Twitter and The New York Times telling reporters to stop using it as a sole source of information, we may be seeing a conscious (and overdue) attempt to reduce Twitter/journalism enmeshment.

Blaming social media for the state of our public square absolves us of responsibility. It also obscures the real issues — from economic insecurity to rapid cultural change — underlying political polarization. Ultimately, internet platforms are what we make of them.

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