

Opinion: Social media issues become societal issues

Social media has become a part of our daily lives, but do you know why it can feel impossible to stop scrolling? It all starts with design, writes Braden Istace.

Over the past decade, social media has become a part of our daily lives. Many people find it hard to imagine what life was without these platforms. However, there are dark undertones to social media and the inability to stop scrolling.

Picture this: you sit down to start a work assignment but decide to ‘quickly’ check your social media before you begin. Next time you look up, two hours have passed without your knowledge. Sound familiar? It should. The companies behind these social media apps work daily to keep you scrolling. Tech giants running these apps profit because advertisers pay to be on their site. The reason the advertisers pay is because they are guaranteed to have an audience for their product. Many people think their data is collected on social media and sold to the highest bidder; however, this is simply not true. Every click you make and every like you give is carefully tracked and stored by the social media companies to present you with the best advertisements possible— now known as surveillance capitalism. The social media companies use this information to keep you engaged, get your friends online and to make their company profit. If advertisers on social media can slowly change what you do, who you are and how you think; they have succeeded. If you do not pay to use social media, advertisers will pay for social media to use you.

Another negative effect is what social media does to mental health, especially in teens. For girls aged 15-19, hospitalization due to self-harm is up 62 per cent since 2010. Suicide for the same group is up 70 per cent since 2010. For girls aged 10-14, the stats are even more alarming. Hospitalization for self-harm in this age group is up 188 per cent and suicide for the same age group is up 151 per cent in the same time frame. The rise of social media directly matches the time for this data, and it clearly shows middle-school students are particularly vulnerable. This age group has also seen a drop in dates, passing tests and overall risk taking. Social media is either killing people or causing people to kill themselves. While computer processing power continues to grow, our human brains have not evolved at the same speed. Human beings are evolved to need community, but they are not evolved to need this much social approval from others.

Furthermore, social media is destroying the fabric of our society. Everyone’s newsfeed is catered to them. If you do not want to see certain viewpoints on your timeline, the platform hides that viewpoint from you. Social media creates a different reality for each user, and it has grown to the point where people with similar interests will not see the exact same posts. For example, Google Autocomplete will offer different searches based on your location and your online history. Each person perceiving a different reality causes rifts in our society and can even bring about violence if the disagreement grows enough. It has also brought about the fake news phenomenon. A recent example was seen during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Every day presented a new miracle cure, a new way to catch the virus, or a new way to take preventive measures against the virus. Many of these claims were false, but they were spread across social media. Social media has become a catch-all for people’s issues. Gone are the days of talking about an issue and coming to a meaningful resolution. It is easier to argue or air out your issues when hiding behind a screen. Lately, social media has brought us the toxic ‘cancel culture’ and further spiked mental health issues around the world.

So, what can be done? The short answer: not much. Social media is only improving at predicting who we are and how we operate. One solution— to introduce regulation for these social media companies and stop the ‘profit at all costs’ mindset many operate with. No matter what comes next, it is time to stop ignoring social media issues and get back to simply being kind to one another.

Braden Istace is a public relations student at Mount Royal University.

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