The sky is bluer on the other side — the changing culture of social media.

Imagine it's 2013 and you're a college junior who's just come back from a boozy night out to get over your cheating ex. You angrily log onto Facebook to change your relationship status to single, you then go to post a photo of yourself on Instagram with a caption that quotes *We Are Never Getting Back Together* by Taylor Swift. And finally venture onto Twitter to let your 146 followers know you're swearing dating off FOREVER! But over 10 years later you've deleted your Facebook account, you can't be bothered to check what's on Instagram, and feel fatigued just from scrolling your Twitt- sorry, X feed. In search of something new you go onto BlueSky hoping that it will be the palette cleanser you've desperately needed… So, what's changed?

"We're seeing the nuts and bolts behind the screen – I think a little bit more." Heather Jaber, a Professor of Communications who specializes in digital and pop culture said. But the truth is, social media hasn't always been this way. Modern social media emerged in the Web 2.0 age. You had a rush of people joining sites that emphasized and promoted authenticity and connecting your real life with your digital one. And people loved it! Victoria, aged 30, shared her thoughts. "For Facebook it really felt like a good place to keep in contact with my friends. To keep up with what's going on in their lives." The idea of sharing your life to everyone you knew was a radical change, but one that transformed the digital culture as we knew it. Professor Jaber lays it out clearly. "These platforms have become ways of authenticating identity and opting in to particular activities that we do in society."

By 2006 Twitter was formed and over time would grow a large audience on the idea that you could build your own community and communicate with a larger audience. That was true for Robert, a 38 year old content creator "It was a lot of fun using those platforms. I enjoyed having access to people from all over the world to share my thoughts and ideas with and engage with ideas of others." Roberts experiences on Twitter were by design, with the advent of a single social media platform that millions of people were on from all over the world, the internet saw what Jaber describes as the creation of transnational communities. However a decade later Twitter would radically transform in way's not everyone would enjoy.

In 2022 Elon Musk acquired Twitter and in 2023 the platform rapidly transformed into X. However many people, particularly those on the left side of the political spectrum, complained about the direction the site took. Robert and Victoria felt the same way. "It really felt like these sites started to push more right wing content into my feed." Social media was now a place where people gathered around their own political opinions and surrounded themselves with those more like minded. Professor Jaber describes what this fragmentation of users online means. "What we see is that the kinds of engagement that are controversial and that look like culture clashes are profitable for platforms." But where are people like Victoria and Robert supposed to go?

BlueSky emerged promoting itself as an alternative to X which by now has been under constant scrutiny. Victoria, feeling increasingly sidelined by the content on X decided to jump ship around a year ago. "They're less toxic and give me the type of content I wanna see while having strong blocking systems in place." The strong blocking system is becoming increasingly more important for many users who've become dismayed with the content policy or lack of moderation that currently exists. Robert also shared what he wanted to see from social media platforms, what he said also largely reflects what he already enjoys about being on BlueSky. "I

have no problem existing on a platform with people politically opposed to myself. But when it's all free for all and hate speech is allowed to roam free, I view that as a massive problem." Victoria and Roberts' experiences show us that users on social media are increasingly upset with the polarization of content and user base of existing sites and want to have more control over what they see. While also recognizing that this trend isn't exactly one that works on building bridges between different groups of society that many people thought social media would do 10 years ago.

With the rapidly changing landscape of social media, Professor Jaber shares her own thoughts on the future of social media. "Maybe it's realizing what's online is not in this imagined space it's affecting my quote on quote real life" Jabers words ring true for many people who are seeking a change with social media and digital culture.