



A meaner Society

The problematic impact of social media runs very deep. It's not simply driving us into isolated digital bubbles that crowd out richer in-person interactions. It is also making the world feel more hostile, less empathetic and less kind. And this is taking a significant toll on our collective wellbeing.

For whilst social media platforms do enable us to share moments of happiness, their design has also made them conducive to some of the worst elements of human nature: abuse, bullying, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia. All such behaviours are on the rise and there's no sign that any of this is slowing down anytime soon.

Of course, hatred and abuse are not new phenomena. But what's different is that social media pumps them into our lives in new and uniquely disturbing ways, at a scale that again is simply unprecedented. And what's so frightening is that it rewards users for doing so. For each retweet we get provides us with a dopamine hit, the same neurotransmitter associated with heroin and morphine. It's a tiny dose, to be sure, but enough to keep us coming back for more. And you know what kind of posts typically engender the most retweets? The most outlandish, extreme and hateful ones.

Whilst it is unlikely that stimulating toxic behaviour was the intention of the founders of these platforms, what is clear is that it fast became something they

tolerated. For the fact is that outrage and anger are better for business. More addictive emotions than kindness or positivity, they keep traffic and throughflow high, thereby increasing the likely number of ad clicks, which is how the social media companies make their money.

It's this impact on the bottom line that helps explain why pretty much anything that will attract eyeballs is tolerated on these platforms, however dark, cruel, or polarising.

It is not only adults being affected by a design ethic that both incentivises us to deliver ever more outraged and divisive messages and enables us to so easily find community in hate.

For children, social media has also become home to abuse and bullying on a distressing scale. In the UK, 65% of students have experienced a form of cyberbullying, with 7% experiencing it 'regularly'. And in a recent UK survey of more than 10,000 young people aged 12 to 20, nearly 70% admitted to being abusive to another person online – whether sending a nasty message, posting hateful comments under a fake username or sharing something with the intention of mocking someone else.

Children have of course always bullied and been bullied. Yet once again it's a matter of scale. For whilst in the past this psychological abuse was typically confined to the playground, park and classroom, today it follows them around inescapably 24/7, streamed into their homes and bedrooms. Moreover, whilst bullying used to be public only to the extent that others witnessed it directly in real time, today the victim's shame is there for all to see, permanently etched into their digital footprint.

Social media is making us lonelier not only because all that time we are spending on it makes us feel less connected to those around us, but also because it is making society as a whole meaner and crueller. And a mean and cruel world is a lonely one.