The Internet is Bad for You. The Internet is Good for You.

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Strangely enough, social technologies can be bad for you and good for you at the same time. Shifting that balance in positive ways doesn't only mean mitigating harm, but also actively cultivating the good parts and ensuring that our mitigation techniques for the bad don't undermine all that good.

1 INTRODUCTION

During the March 2023 congressional hearing featuring TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew, Representative Frank Pallone of New Jersey said that he wasn't convinced that "the benefits outweigh the risks that [TikTok] poses to Americans in its current form" [3]. Though in the entire four hour hearing, there was essentially no acknowledgment of those benefits or any evidence given for the claim that they are outweighed by risks.

So yes, focusing entirely on the negative impacts of technology can lead to bypassing the potential of that same technology to support well-being and flourishing. It is important to acknowledge that social technology can be good for you and bad for you at the same time. But unfortunately many attempts to cut out the bad (including regulatory efforts) run the risk of entirely undermining all the good.

Part of my research group's agenda has focused on the trade-offs inherent in online communities (often forcusing on marginalized or stigmatized groups and experiences)–for example, LGBTQ people, online fandom, Black Twitter, fat people, and people with chronic health conditions [1, 2, 4, 6, 7]. Both benefits and harms tend to be amplified in these contexts–but importantly, those benefits are often deeply profound. For example, attempting to solve problems around privacy could easily result in limiting discoverability and finding connections. Or calibrating content moderation towards more false positives than false negatives might help mitigate toxic content, but can also limit important amplification of voices and community building.

It is critical therefore that social computing research works not only towards mitigating harm but also cultivating the positive aspects of social technologies and imagining more positive futures. For example, speculative design work led by my former PhD advisee Shamika Klassen imagined how social media and communication technologies might be different if designed by Black women, femmes, and non-binary people [5, 8]. This kind of positive speculation helps us imagine a future where technology like TikTok is better, not gone.

2 EULOGIES FOR TWITTER

As the song goes, "you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone," and one time that the positive aspects of a social technology can come into focus is if that technology is no longer available or changes drastically. In the wake of

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Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter and subsequent design, policy, and general vibe changes, many individuals and communities considered what the platform meant to them.

In the spring of 2023, a group of collaborators and I (as part of a broader research project on platform migration) conducted a study we called the "Twitter Eulogy Project." About 1,000 participants took a short questionnaire that asked questions about e.g. best and worst experiences on Twitter, how their lives would be better or worse with Twitter gone, and also asked what they would say at Twitter's funeral. We are still in the process of analyzing the data, but below are a few eulogies that demonstrate the potential for hugely positive impact even for a social technology that had so many flaws.

- I had great time, met amazing people and learned a lot. I learned to be more patient and understanding, and definitely more tolerant. I am grateful that I had Twitter in my life.
- I found some of the nicest people I've ever met through. You showed me that the brightest, kindest, nicest or even moderately sound reasoning peoples are neither found in media nor in politics [...] That a lot of people are unbelievably funny and highly creative. And that a lot of people really prefer to be nice to each other than to be mean.
- As a site, it saw me through difficult times, through providing community where I had none, pointing me to communities where I sought one, and providing expressive space for me to more freely explore my identity in ways I was simply unable to safely do around my peers in real life.
- I remember the first days I used Twitter. It was 2009 — my first child was just born, and the schedule of keeping him pampered, fed, and alive led to many lonely days and nights. Sometimes it was just the two of us up late, me rocking him to sleep in one hand, and the other hand finding itself lured to Twitter. Checking into my local communities on those dark, sleepless nights kept me in touch with my fellow humans, and I'll never forget how I no longer felt alone if I could scroll and catch up on my own schedule. No matter how much Twitter degraded, I'll always be grateful for the line life it provided this new dad.
- Twitter really opened up the world for me - finding people all over the world to give first hand knowledge of what was happening in their world was great. [...] I hope that the future brings a new technology and platform that can match and even enhance that experience.
- Twitter at its height was an amazing place for direct human interaction, where you could find yourself talking to people you wouldn't have met otherwise. It was a place where you could ask for help on really random or esoteric topics, and likely get it.
- Twitter was revolutionary in some ways. It allowed the average person to be part of a global conversation, and that has had a real effect on our politics and culture. It allowed people to organize themselves in a truly revolutionary way.
- This question is actually making me tear up a little. The very best part of Twitter was getting to be close to brilliant, kooky people from everywhere. The generosity of experts was particularly miraculous, to me. When I wanted to learn about health policy, I got to learn from the very best experts on health policy in the whole world. When I had a question about anything – lizards, weather, epidemiology, politics, history, anything – there was always a friendly expert I could ask about it. Those experts taught me so very much, for free, just because they loved sharing their expertise with enthusiastic strangers. What a gift that was!

- It was really great to spend more than 10 very enlightening and entertaining years with you, thank you for everything. Also for the insights into other bubbles apart from my own heap. I also lost many hours of my life to you and cat gifs but maybe even that is ok - because nobody knows what if. *Rest in peace, Twitter. I owe you.*

When it comes to Twitter, TikTok, or any other social technology that can be good and bad at the same time, let's try our best not to undermine the positive. We owe them a lot, too.

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