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Twenty Years of Social Media; Let's Discuss "The Untold Truths"¹

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Abstract

While social media have become a routine for billion of people and their key mean of communication, there are several issues and questions to be addressed with social media. This publication examines the key issues which have risen 20 years after the launch of Facebook and its "untold truths" which are discussed in this publication. Issues such as the mental effect of social media on its users – mostly young users -, manipulation of data, post-truth and the rapid expansion of "fake news" are just some of those "untold truths" discussed on this paper. Furthermore, this publication moves on with some recommendations on how to handle those realities. There are some hints so to reduce the time spent on social media, but also it refers on the need to ask for counseling if this is necessary.

Keywords: social media, untold truths, problems, facebook, mental health, post-truth.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, social media has revolutionized the way we communicate and share information (Sadagheyani & Tatari, 2020). With its rapid expansion, social media has become an integral part of our daily lives, influencing everything from personal relationships to political movements (Jafar et al., 2023). In recent years, the influence of social media has become more apparent, with its impact reaching every corner of the globe. From the way we consume news and form opinions to the way we present ourselves online, social media has truly reshaped our world.

Having understood that Facebook has come of age and it is a mature media, it is time to discuss how it influences our lives. This op-ed discusses the impact of Facebook and other social media on our daily routines, how social media are shaping the public opinion with special references on post-truth and the Cambridge Analytica scandal along with the effect in the mental state of social media users. Furthermore, the op-ed will provide a number of solutions and how to do so to reduce our reliance on social media.

Facebook and social media are coming out of age

On the occasion of 20 years since Facebook was launched it has come the time to make a first assessment of the role of social media in Greece. Facebook was created by Mark Zuckerberg and his fellow students at Harvard University. Initially, it was intended for use only by Harvard students as a

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social exchange medium before expanding to other colleges and eventually becoming available to the general public. It is initially accepted that through social media, individuals have the opportunity to communicate with each other, to receive information about what concerns us or to discuss policy issues through social communication media, thereby influencing political dialogue and public perceptions. Moreover, it is clear that in Greece, as it happens on other countries, social platforms influence the formation of public opinion on political issues, social or cultural, through the dissemination of opinions and information. For this reason, politicians are also actively using social media to communicate with citizens and to promote their views and policies (Donlan, 2014).

It is therefore important to note that the correct use or non-use of social media in our country also depends to a large extent on how they are used and how aware their users are. But is it not for this reason that it is time to look at some unreasonable truths about their impact on human behaviour, personal relations, self-esteem, political information and our democracy?

Social media as a threat to contemporary liberal democracies?

Today, we know that the manipulative strategies that social media and technology companies use to lure consumers have a psychological basis. Social media algorithms work complexly and are usually private and protected secrets by the companies that create them. However, we can understand the general principles that guide them made to be compulsive in use, which makes them deviate from real-life obligations such as relationships, work and education. In fact, they observe, monitor and quantify the online behavior of users, using the information to create artificial intelligence models that predict our behaviour (Faelens et al, 2019). Just to name one example of how Facebook and other social media may manipulate the electoral base, we can name the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

More precisely, the Cambridge Analytica scandal had a profound impact on influencing public opinion. The scandal revealed how personal data collected from social media platforms was used to manipulate and target individuals with highly tailored and manipulative political messages. The scandal sparked a global conversation about data privacy and the use of personal information for targeted advertising and political purposes. It raised concerns about the ethical implications of using big data to sway public opinion and highlighted the need for stricter regulations to protect individuals' online privacy (Richterich, 2018). Furthermore, the fallout from the scandal led to increased scrutiny of social media platforms and their role in shaping public discourse and opinion. As a result, it prompted discussions about the responsibility of tech companies and the potential impact on democratic processes. The aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal also spurred calls for greater transparency and accountability from both tech companies and political organizations. It prompted

citizens and policymakers to reassess the extent to which online platforms and digital advertising should be regulated to prevent similar incidents in the future. Moreover, the scandal highlighted the power and potential dangers of using sophisticated data analytics and targeted messaging to influence public opinion. It paved the way for discussions on the broader societal implications of such practices, including the potential erosion of trust in democratic institutions and the impact on the fairness of electoral processes. As a result, the Cambridge Analytica scandal continues to serve as a pivotal moment in the ongoing debate about the intersection of technology, data privacy, and democracy. It underscored the need for robust safeguards to protect individuals' personal information and to ensure the integrity of public discourse in the digital age (Berghel, 2018).

Social media as a threat to mental health?

Social media aims to three main objectives: firstly, to ensure that consumers continue to scroll, that we return and visit them over and over again during the day, and finally, that they generate as much revenue as possible. Many experts say openly that social media use a business model of disinformation to increase their profits by letting uncontrolled messages reach anyone at the best price for advertisers (which “reach” through social media users) (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). They are thus modifying our behavior as users with methods of psychological manipulation made possible by the algorithms on which their developers rely to keep us increasingly “connected” to them. These algorithms are used to tailor the content that users see on social media platforms according to our interests based on our previous activities and which content interacts best with us. They also place higher in the news stream content that is likely to cause our reaction as users, such as posts with a lot of likes or comments. They then display commercial messages trying to show advertisements that are more likely to interest us (Astleitner et al., 2023).

It is now clear that addiction to technology is a problem and much bigger than any other addiction problem in our country. Excessive use of social media can lead to addiction and isolate individuals from the real world and their social relationships. In interviews even the former director of Facebook, argues that the company's main priority is updating the app with more addictive features, in order to continuously improve the time we users spend on it. If a user frequently interacts with content on a particular topic, the algorithm will suggest more similar content in the future, and that is what is behind the abuse. Even the degree of addiction even in our emails (business and personal) can be compared to a casino slot machine after we constantly check our phones in the hope of receiving a notification, as we turn a slot machine in the hopes of winning (Atroszko et al., 2020).

Social media is no longer seen as a tool, as their purpose is evolving and becoming more widely accepted in our culture with the aim of tempting users to click to see more material. They have also been shot for helping to disseminate false information, which has been linked to public health emergencies, general confusion and mistrust in established media sources, and as people are unable to discern them, social gaps and ideological divisions are created, a phenomenon that is also observed in Greece. Just read the comments in posts on controversial topics and you will understand it from the expressions of hatred and separation, as often users exploit anonymity to promote intolerant opinions and express provocative comments. So, we're basically talking about the consequences of a kind of filter bubble where users are in an online reality that focuses only on their preferences and beliefs (Brailovskaia, et al., 2020). Thus, content that supports our pre-existing opinions and preferences has the highest priority than social media algorithms, and appears before us as a priority by deepening ideological divisions and polarizing our society.

Finally, excessive use of social media has negative effects on the psychology of individuals, such as increased stress, decreased self-esteem and increased anxiety leading many users to isolation from the real world and their social relationships (Nikbin et al., 2021). In addition, regular exposure to well-selected photos and social media posts can cause negative social comparisons, which can also increase low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy, especially in younger users (Surat et al, 2021). There is also a correlation between the frequent use of social media and self-injury and suicide resulting in hospitalization (Huang et al, 2023), especially among adolescents, and a remarkable percentage increase in adolescent hospitalizations in countries that have relatively high rates of anxiety, depression, loneliness and other mental health problems, often due to cyberbullying and the deterioration of their face-to-face communication skills (such as the US), which makes it difficult for them to establish and maintain deep connections in real life (Kannan & Kumar, 2022).

Social media and post-truth

Let's not hide; People born after the millennium have been exposed to a constant stream of social media material from an early age, as they have grown up in a world where the use of social networks is the norm. It is now clear that a small group of developers in Silicon Valley is “creating code” that affects billions of people worldwide along with “climate change of culture” is becoming a reality, because social media is a dominant force that influences the way people perceive and receive information. Besides that, social media have been the main cause behind the evolving of “Post-Truth Politics” and the development of unscientific and non-evidence based “facts” (Ejue& Etim, 2024). According to Beeman (2018) the rapid growth and penetration on the public of social media has given

access on everyone to state their opinion, even if this is an unrealistic and often emotional or ideological driven opinion that often contradicts the scientific and evidence-based truth. Post-truth was used from various enemies of liberal democracies such as Donald Trump, Brexit supporters Quanon media and from Russia. Their audience was the millions of users who reproduced social media content because they “saw it on the internet” without making a reflection on whether this post or opinion is true or if it is evidence based. An example of how social media have promoted post-truth with a negative effect on the public opinion and even affecting the public opinion during election times, besides the Cambridge analytica scandal discussed in a previous paragraph, has been the case of “Pizzagate scandal” and relied on fake news and conspiracy theories so to create a negative image for Hillary Clinton in the Presidential elections of 2016 (Bleakley, 2023).

But is there anything we can do? Practical solutions

Based on the above it comes the question; But is there anything we can do? The answer is yes. Initially, as users, we set our own limits on the use of social media. This can be achieved through self-discipline and awareness of the time we devote to them. We can, for example, set daily or weekly usage targets and use built-in tools, such as screen time monitoring programs or application usage screens on their devices (such tools/ “apps”, have all our modern mobile phones, tablets, and computers) (Seiferth et al, 2023). Also, something few people know is that Instagram and Facebook offer features like "your activity" and "time on Facebook" that show us how much time we spend on these apps. Moreover, by disabling notifications, refusing to watch'recommendations' for other YouTube videos, using search engines that do not store our search history and setting guidelines for using our mobile phone at home, we can cope with the increase inflow of information from social media and also to reduce our dependency on social media.

Furthermore, with what we can do practically for the most vulnerable ages to over-exposure, parents can use parental control software to restrict their children's access to social media and set specific hours of use by detecting over-use. Finally, for people struggling with severe social media addiction, seeking professional help from therapists or consultants specialising in digital addiction is the only solution. Already in Greece Mental Health Centres, online platforms and organizations, NGOs and social support organisations offer mental health services and provide information, support and resources for people experiencing social media addiction. Besides that, there are many “social media detox” practices on the internet, while an emerging concept is the Digital detox tourism where consumers/tourists are spending time away from home without internet connection (Gong et al., 2023).

Conclusions

In conclusion, even though online media have many advantages, users should bear in mind and take measures to reduce the harmful effects. We need, inductively, immediate action so to manage all the above consequences at state, family and individual level, aiming at rational use, not accepting their content as valid a priori and in every way preventing addiction phenomena that they cause in Greek society as the role of social media in Greece follows the general trends that are observed at the global level, but with the particular influences that have been analyzed above and which are specific to Greece's society and culture. Furthermore, the public institutions and gatekeepers must be always in alarm for the potential impact of social media content on public opinion and on public perceptions. Previous cases, such as the Pizzagate and Cambridge Analytica scandal indicate that social media can easily become a tool of spreading fake news and disinformation which causes evils among civilians. For this reason this op-ed article presents a number of practices which can help individuals to detox from social media.

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