

Isolation media

The Antisocial Impact of Social Media on Democracy

By Allison Butler

Despite the moniker ‘social media,’ these technologies and platforms are anything but social. Though social media technologies and platforms promise users a [sense of community](#), much of the work done on social media happens in isolation and is [viewed negatively](#). Though presented as social, users scroll, like, comment, follow, un-follow, and post, alone, behind a screen. This creates a paradox where digital technologies make space for audiences to share more and more of their lives, while interacting with each other less and less. Indeed, these platforms are more aptly described as “isolation media.”

Users, especially [young users](#), are not to be blamed for this predicament. They were born into this environment, with zero say in its development, and yet they hold the vast majority of the pressure to fill the digital space and follow the digital rules. While users do most of the labor on social media sites, they are often docile bodies in the face of corporate power. Potential social media users have two options: To eschew social media entirely, or to agree, entirely, with the policies and practices of the corporation. Neither of these options have any degree of nuance, flexibility, or plausibility. The problem of social media’s anti-social and anti-democratic principles lies with the corporate owners and managers.

Merriam-Webster defines democracy as “a government by the people,” and “a government by which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections.” Social media organizations do not follow these definitions at all. The “government” of social media is one run by [tech oligarchs](#) where supreme power is vested in the executives and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of complex and complicated privacy policies, terms of service, and creative use of language. It is the platform operators, not the community, who set the community guidelines.

A close analysis of the terms of service and privacy policies of the most popular social media sites, including but not limited to, [Facebook](#), [SnapChat](#), [TikTok](#), and [Instagram](#), demonstrate a clear and unalterable power differential. Social media users of these platforms give up the rights to their face and their likeness, even in death,



graphic: Mark Grabowski

and are responsible for checking the privacy policies to see if they have changed. And, in an even more impossible bind, children under the age of consent for their own social media accounts can have their images posted to other social media accounts; these images are then owned, shared, and profited from by any corporate partners. Even when users delete an account, all their information remains the property of the corporation. No company allows for any legal action in case of anything negative connected with their product, including user death. Any user dissatisfaction is handled either through deletion of the account or through forced arbitration.

These terms illustrate the dismantling of our personal democracy. In a media and economic environment run by private, for-profit companies, user entertainment and satisfaction is a distant third to the desire for corporate profit and user data. User isolation may cause hand-wringing among the non-tech elite, however, this isolation feeds into exactly what the corporate owners desire more of: profit and data.

However, all hope is not lost, if one looks closely. Shards of evidence demonstrate that we may be at a tipping point in social media use; Big Tech companies lay off [large numbers of employees](#) and some people look [beyond the apps](#) to meet people in real life. Not surprisingly, users may combat the isolation and the evident absence of connection they were promised, by coming to their own rescue via community and collaboration.

Hyperlinks for this article at <https://bit.ly/47cSMAO>

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