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Social Media Is Dead

There are a lot of concerns that Musk will soon destroy Twitter, but we shouldn't worry about this largely because social media networking is already dead. That is, the platforms that came to define "social media" as we came to know it over the last decade-and-change—Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, to be sure, but also Tumblr and even earlier progenitors like MySpace—are largely being left in the dust and out-competed, replaced by other platforms and their own models of online interaction.

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Facebook has of course imploded as years of scandals have finally caught up with it, and Instagram, while still used by many, is widely hated for serving endless sponsored content instead of, you know, your friends. Twitter is currently facing the threat of mass exodus after Musk's takeover,

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A BIRD GETTING GUILLOTINED. PHOTO BY LIGHTCOME.

Instead, we're getting YouTube, TikTok, Twitch, and an endless number of streaming platforms that replace the more rhizomatic structure of

TikTok, which is now either the first or second most popular website on the internet, is nominally "social media." But while anyone can make TikToks, the platform is designed for passive consumption, and, for the most part, an influencer-and-celebrity broadcasting model has emerged: people have their favorite "creators" and follow them, or are passively fed their content on the For You page. Instagram is moving in this direction, too, despite the fact that users seem to hate it.

We could mourn the loss of social media and debate the reasons for this shift—perhaps one reason is that just posting for your friends doesn't pay the bills, in most cases, combined with basic degradation of the platforms in the search for profit—or we could seize the moment and arrive at a more radical conclusion: that true social media doesn't actually exist, and never did.

What we do have, and sometimes enjoy, are a series of communication networks interested in providing a paltry simulacrum of sociality in service of behavior modification and profit maximization. It's important to keep this in mind because forgetting that we don't actually have real social networks—that is, networks centered on bonds and groups that go beyond

One way to think about this: there is no singular internet, but instead a patchwork of digital realms and protocols with their own histories, geopolitics, political economies, incentives, and so forth that we collectively refer to as “the Internet.” There are superficial similarities, sure, between how the Internet is used worldwide—surfing, shopping, videos, etc.—but these are relatively recent developments grafted onto wildly different infrastructures, legal regimes, political arrangements, geopolitical concerns, and economic terrains across the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

The shorthand referent is an artifact that obscures the artifice. This is true of “the internet,” as well as “platforms” and especially “social media.” Take the core thrust of the social network ad copy that many still recite as gospel: by harnessing the power of the internet, global communications networks, and other digital technologies, we can create spaces where communities can form and thrive. Places where we can learn about the world and connect to it, keep track of our friends or make new ones, form new identities or plug into existing ones, organize, discover, flourish, yadda yadda.

as such even when it was initially pitched, but it has only been altered slightly since then. Today, we recognize that the technologies responsible for social media do not always harmoniously synergize with one another to create wonderful communities. It's relatively easy for these networks to incite a genocide, spark a mental health crisis, radicalize people, black out entire countries, and surveil specific populations.

Much of this has been a long time coming: For years, our social media feeds have largely not been unadulterated streams of posts from friends and people we've chosen to follow. Instead, the content we are most likely to see is, famously, selected by inscrutable algorithms, which themselves can be bypassed by advertisers who pay to boost or promote their posts. The result can hardly be called anything "social"—the goal here is mind-numbingly dull absurdities calibrated to increase and sustain engagement, not the construction of communities that can collaborate or communicate in ways that aren't mediated by a startup or a market.

And yet we still look to tech to act as a tool that will bring about a blissful, idealized state of nature. The right algorithms powered by the right artificial intelligence will amplify the right characteristics and ensure ideal content moderation, fight disinformation, avoid harming mental health, and allow us to get back to what matters: connecting with each other on platforms owned by corporations.

talking about when we say “social media” and dig deeper into the tools that are supposed to save it. For the most part, when it comes to the major firms that defined the term over the last few years, social media refers to platforms where user growth is leveraged into advertiser revenue, along with new goods and services to sustain user growth that is leveraged into advertiser revenue, and so on. These platforms allow for users to connect to others, and in the process of all that connection generate data which other businesses pay for and use to offer more relevant goods and services and experiences.

That’s still a relatively rose-tinted picture, however. A sober look at the political economy underwriting all of this reveals some grim details. Every major aspect of social media is privately owned and run. The data we generate, the data centers that hold it, the algorithms that process it, the servers that host it, the teams that label and sort and interact with it, the cables along which it travels—the platforms, their infrastructure, and the technical know-how are not ours. Even the data we might use to develop alternatives is hoarded by firms who are committed to business models that require this wholly privatized system. The computational resources we might use to experiment with that data are privately owned by the tech companies or other concentrations of capital—namely real estate investment trusts—that treat internet infrastructure as tradable financial assets rented back to major technology firms.

media” or “social networks” wrongly suggests we’ve created a fixed *thing* organized around sociality. We’ve created something that offers a simulacrum of social relations given the needs, interests, and concerns of our wholly privately-run system and the various corporations that dominate it. A communication network of a sort, maybe, but not real social media that facilitates human interaction without the intertwined imperatives of profit and empire.

Social media—really social media, not just the platforms that came to define the term—is worth reclaiming and discovering, and worth working towards, rather than simply letting the more unidirectional broadcast model simply take over.

Outside of the United States, where other apps dominate daily life we can get glimpses of other threads that might be integrated into or rejected by an alternative social media. Messaging apps like Whatsapp—integral to daily life in countries like Brazil, but still owned by Facebook—haven’t been successfully monetized and reorganized around advertiser revenue (or a quest to create additional revenue streams), but that hasn’t shielded it from familiar issues: disinformation, misinformation, and mob violence. Along all this, there’s been a notable retreat into group chats and alternative platforms explicitly organized around messaging, suggesting that there’s some aversion to, frustration with, and limitation of this grand, totalizing

of junk—it's not like we aren't doing that now.

But having just one more place online to make posts without someone like Musk at the helm doesn't address the basic problems of "social media," or "the internet" writ large. The greatest enemy to actually creating social media, to creating alternatives to the networks and platforms that exist today, is all of the complex systems that are behind dominant communication networks and sustain them. It is not simply an issue of getting people to use alternatives such as Mastodon, or getting people to petition for different reforms. The solution isn't to simply collectively choose another alternative, but to mobilize to undermine the current system, which, again, is hostile at every level to alternatives.

It's not just that each layer and component of how our digital goods and services are imagined, funded, designed, and deployed is hostile to anything but the anti-social arrangements we were tricked into calling social media. It's also that our politics are hostile to it, our economics are hostile to it, our legal codes are hostile to it, and our culture is hostile to it.

With all of this in mind, it makes sense that the communication networks we call "social media" dominate today. This is a world where the geopolitics of the Cold War gave birth to Silicon Valley and the military collaboration

interested in surveilling or controlling their populations). And, until there's a fundamental shift, we will never see true social media on a massive scale.

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