How can social media be better? Four researchers compare strategies

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Major platform social media is in an upheaval. Bluesky and Meta's Threads want to be Twitter. LinkedIn's influence is rising. Meanwhile, Twitter has become X. And X wants to be an everything app—possibly

including job listings, payment and ride-hailing—even as advertising revenue flounders. Amid this, op-ed after op-ed announces the impending death of social media.

The turmoil has many people reconsidering what they want out of social media at scale: Can it be better? Four researchers at the University of Washington have approached this question from different angles.

Amy X. Zhang, a UW assistant professor in the Paul G. Allen School of Computer Science & Engineering, was the senior author of two papers at the [CSCW 2023 conference](#) in Minneapolis last week. One [includes information](#) about where articles on social media came from, with the aim of curbing misinformation; the other looks at [how the design of personal content moderation tools](#) affects social media users.

For the last couple years, Katherine Cross, a UW doctoral student in the Information School who researches online harassment, has written a column in *Wired* that often focuses on the trouble with social media. Amanda Baughan, a UW doctoral student in the Allen School, studies how people enter dissociative states on social media. Martin Saveski, a UW assistant professor in the iSchool, is researching tools to [decrease polarization](#) on social media.

UW News talked with the four of them about what's wrong with social media and how it might improve.

What are some significant problems you see with major social media platforms?

Amy X. Zhang: A big problem to me is the centralization of power—that the platforms can decide what content should be shown and what should get posted to the top of one feed for millions of people. That brings up

issues of accountability and of localization to specific communities or cultures. A singular perspective—oftentimes coming from, for example, workers in Silicon Valley—won't fit for lots of people. Alongside this is the homogenization of our digital social experiences, which don't come close to the richness and vividness of our actual social lives.

Katherine Cross: Amy is quite right. I would add that open platforms—which anyone can join and on which everyone talks to everyone, constantly—allow for the most rapid acceleration of virality, far beyond anything that has existed previously. It also means that if someone is trying to start a harassment campaign, they can easily spread it virally to thousands of users.

Those of us who remember LiveJournal know that earlier iterations of the Internet were no stranger to drama and harassment. But the design of earlier platforms provided a great many speed bumps for toxicity and abuse. A lot of that friction has gone away as a condition of the design of open platforms. So whether it's Tumblr or Twitter or Facebook, these platforms allow for the most rapid acceleration of the worst aspects of our internet use.

Amanda Baughan: Some other problems are the many mechanisms that seek to draw people in and keep them on a site. These can be notifications that are personalized to the content that you like or the time you normally open the app; the infinite feeds that keep you scrolling; and the rewards structure that keeps you on the hunt for content that might scratch your brain in the way that you find most appealing. Even though social media could be a great tool for connection or self-expression, people are often in an adversarial relationship with these interfaces that are trying to keep them stuck.

Martin Saveski: I will add that these platforms are designed for very shallow connections. Right now, I'm asking: How can we design

platforms with scale but still provide an environment where people can communicate and connect more deeply? After Twitter open-sourced its feed algorithm and many of the Facebook files were released, we know what we'd previously guessed: They primarily optimize for engagement. So how do we do that better? It's clear that there is value in engagement. But perhaps there are other things that we could be thinking about when designing the experience.

How are you trying to make large social media platforms better for the people using them?

KC: My work is trying to do at least two things, practically. I'm looking at the lives and travails of content moderators, the people whose jobs it is to make the internet more usable for ordinary people. They deserve better working conditions and more mental health support. The second part is—I hate to make it seem so simple—almost an exhortation to spend less time on open platforms. As long as we have open platforms, the only effective solution for a number of problems is to simply get people to use these platforms less.

AB: I've been thinking a lot about our experiences online as dissociative, rather than addictive. Dissociation can be part of healthy cognitive functioning. Daydreaming, for example, is considered dissociation. But when you combine people's reduced self-reflection and self-monitoring on a platform designed to keep them on a site, people start to sink more time into the platform than they really want to.

This explains part of why people have these fraught relationships with their social media—neither satisfied, nor willing to quit. So I've looked at designs that might help people re-engage their self-monitoring and disrupt dissociation. For example, platforms could separate content into smaller chunks, which is currently available on X; add a "you're all

caught up" label; or tell users they've been scrolling for a certain amount of time.

AXZ: I've been looking at what it would mean to decentralize these major platforms' power by building tools for users or communities who don't have lots of time and resources. For instance, if you are getting harassed and you're developing word lists and blocking harassers, can we build a tool that lets you share that with people in a similar situation? I'm also really interested in end-to-end encrypted social media, like WhatsApp or Signal. Right now, because of encryption, nobody's moderating content. The platform can't do it, and there aren't tools for users or communities to do it. So you just have massive issues with abuse on these platforms.

MS: Recently I've worked with collaborators at Stanford to think about how to [embed societal values more explicitly in social media algorithms](link). Intentionally or not, algorithms reflect values. We found that if we encode democratic values in platforms' algorithms, we see a reduction in polarization, but people are still reasonably engaged. Now we're launching a larger field experiment to study how people are affected if we sort their feeds differently or remove some types of information from them?

What do you see as the potential for large social media?

AXZ: I've always had a love-hate relationship with Twitter. It has been great for my career in many ways. I used to spend lots of time sharing my research, hearing about other people's research, sometimes even starting collaborations. Twitter has been the de facto place for academic sharing and conversation, but should it be? Is it a place where junior scholars feel welcome to participate? Is it inclusive of everyone's voices?

Is it what we really want out of a forum for scholarly communication? In some ways, yes. But in many ways, no.

Twitter has had so many problems over the years with harassment. If we were to design something that reflects the values of an academic community, which does want to be inclusive and to share its research with the world, what could that look like? I don't know exactly, but I do think it takes some rethinking.

KC: Again, I agree completely with Amy. Twitter could, in theory, be good for sharing articles. Occasionally, when an article of mine really caught fire, it was partially because it was getting shared a lot on a platform like Twitter. But I've watched online harassment dynamics play out between journalists or academics.

For example, I followed a lot of epidemiologists and public health experts, all of whom had expertise on COVID-19. And I watched as their excessive use of Twitter led them to degenerate into these warring camps. I've spoken to many of these people privately, and they said that it corroded actual academic relationships. That's where I feel that the professional benefits are sometimes overstated.

These platforms can also be good for interpersonal relationships. I've made a lot of friends through Twitter. It has occasionally helped my career. It's useful for networking in very small minority communities, like the transgender community, or any number of other groups of people who make up 1% of the population. It's also been great for private crowdfunding because of the ease of virality on an open platform. But I still think that there is something to be said for recouping some of these benefits on smaller, more closed platforms.

Given all the turmoil with major platforms lately, are

you hopeful about any of the changes you're seeing either in platforms or in how the public is relating to these platforms?

MS: In an interesting way, the fact that Musk closed Twitter's data access has encouraged researchers to think beyond Twitter. I'm personally very excited about new social media platforms—especially Bluesky, because people can own their data and also control what they see in their feeds without it being so centralized. Hopefully, that will lead to a better version of whatever we've had.

AB: The recent changes of Twitter have shown how much [platform](#) design and governance can have a huge impact on people's experiences. I've seen the quality of my feed get much worse, and it's led me to log off much more quickly. So I hope that this has led people—who aren't just social media researchers—to question how these platforms are made and how they want to use them.

KC: I effectively stopped using Twitter when Musk took over, but earlier this year, I gave up on it completely. I think that, like Amanda, I take hope from the fact that a lot of people are clearing away their preconceptions about social [media](#) being inevitable and fixed. I always try to teach my students that no technology's form is inevitable. We have a say over its shape.

AXZ: When I started grad school, Facebook was the dominant thing. It was so hard for me to imagine a world without it, or without the social networking paradigm of people following each other. I just assumed that this was the future. Now we're in this fragmented landscape. People are leaving Facebook for other platforms, then leaving those platforms for even other platforms. We lose something with that fragmentation, for sure.

When Twitter first appeared, there was some excitement about its role for democracy, that it could be "the global town square." It was perhaps naive of us to think that, and we've learned the downsides. Now we're correcting toward a fragmented landscape, which is maybe more reflective of how we interact socially and is perhaps healthier.

KC: In my dissertation, I argue that [social media](#) has often been anti-political. During the previous Iranian uprisings in 2009, for instance, there was so much hope that Twitter and open platforms like it were going to be self-organizing networks that could change the world. What we began to get were things like the Rohingya genocide, during which anti-Muslim hate speech proliferated on Facebook, but not the endurance of democracy, because the latter requires a public to be able to deliberate.

In theory, Twitter can get masses of people out onto the streets, which is extraordinarily important. But it gives them no mechanism for deciding what to do with all that power that they have gained. And it's why these movements often dissolve. These platforms are very good at provoking internecine conflict, but not good at providing a space for safe, effective deliberation to do or become something new as a collective.

More information: K. J. Kevin Feng et al, Examining the Impact of Provenance-Enabled Media on Trust and Accuracy Perceptions, *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* (2023). [DOI: 10.1145/3610061](#)

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