

Will hiding 'like' counts and other numbers improve social media?

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University of Illinois researcher Ben Grosser began experimenting with hiding the metrics on social media platforms seven years ago. Now, tech companies are following his lead with tests that hide “like” counts and other metrics. Grosser said hiding those numbers makes users feel less competitive and reduces other negative social effects of using the platforms. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

With social media companies under scrutiny for contributing to negative social pressure, Facebook announced in late September that it was starting a test in Australia to hide "like" counts and other metrics on posts. Instagram (owned by Facebook) began a similar experiment in seven countries earlier this year, and Twitter developed an experimental app that also hides some metrics. University of Illinois art professor Ben Grosser, also the co-founder of the Critical Technology Studies Lab at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications, has been looking at the effects of those numbers on users for seven years. In 2012, he created Facebook Demetricator, a browser extension to hide all metrics on Facebook, and he followed that with Twitter Demetricator in 2018 and Instagram Demetricator in 2019. Grosser spoke with News Bureau arts and humanities editor Jodi Heckel.

Did your work lead Facebook, Instagram and Twitter—among the world's most high-profile and successful technology companies—to experiment with hiding metrics?

Undoubtedly yes, though it's hard to quantify precisely how much. I first coined the term "demetrication" when I launched Facebook Demetricator in 2012. Back then I was the only one modifying Facebook in order to talk about the negative cultural effects of visible metrics on [social media platforms](#). Now, seven years later, demetrication is seeing increasing usage in relation to recent experiments by the major tech companies.

Along the way, there's been plenty of clues that [social media companies](#) have been paying attention. After I launched in 2012, I could see from my logs that it was being installed by developers at Facebook. The project has had years of sustained coverage in publications and forums read widely in Silicon Valley such as Wired, Fast Company and Hacker

News, as well as in mainstream publications including The Atlantic and The Washington Post.

In 2016, Facebook filed a complaint to get Demetricator kicked off of Google's Chrome Web Store (it was subsequently restored with help from the Electronic Frontier Foundation). Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey replied to a tweet about the project in 2018. All of this occurred before Facebook, Twitter or Instagram began experimenting with hiding metrics.

What do you think of their experiments in hiding like counts?

I'm happy to see Twitter, Facebook and Instagram now acknowledging that visible metrics can have negative effects on users—and that they've started experimenting with hiding a few. But I'm skeptical of their limited approach. Dorsey has stated publicly that the "follower" metric incentivizes negative behaviors, but Twitter hasn't hidden it. Instagram's test hides the like count from other users, but leaves it visible for the person who uploaded the image. My research shows that metrics throughout these platforms (not just the like count) have broad negative effects, yet the company experiments are incomplete. Why don't they hide them all?

They've said that they're conducting tests with these experiments, but they don't say much about what they're testing for. It's logical to deduce that they're testing how these changes will affect their profits. If they hide the like count, does it make for more engagement or less? Does it make their numbers go up or down?

How will the limited experiments with hiding these metrics change user experiences?

The effect is real but not as substantial as it could be. Hiding the like count, even in the limited way they are doing it, will definitely change how people react to their feeds. Users will no longer focus on the like count as the primary method through which they evaluate content.

But because users have been conditioned for 15 years to focus on the metrics, they're just going to turn to any other [metric](#) in the vicinity. In the case of Instagram and Facebook, the comment count is likely to become the new like count. And if they keep the like count visible for those who posted something, it's still acting on those users, influencing what they post, what they don't post, and how they feel about what they've posted.

How have users reacted to your Demetricator projects?

Most broadly, users of Demetricator report focusing on the content rather than the metrics. Along the way they feel less competitive and anxious, no longer thinking or worrying about why someone else has more followers or likes than they do. Users also say visible metrics were producing compulsive behaviors—pushing them to keep checking how many likes or new notifications they had recently received.

Also, some users of Demetricator have come to realize that they've been creating rules for themselves about how to interact on these platforms based on what the numbers say—and this rule-making happened without them ever realizing it. For example, they won't "like" a post if it has fewer than, say, five likes, but they didn't realize they'd made this "rule" until the numbers were hidden.

Overall, reactions to Demetricator reveal how visible metrics make us algorithmic in the way we react to and work within social media

platforms. The metrics drive our behavior, influence who we talk to, change what we say and affect how we feel about ourselves.

What is the role of art in educating social media users and influencing technology companies?

Art, at its best, helps us see the world differently than we did before. Critiques of big systems can come from small places, and alternative viewpoints that come from artistic research methods can reveal aspects about technology and culture that were previously hard to see.

Facebook Demetricator is a different lens through which to understand social media. By design, it allows users to try out a metrics-free social media experience for themselves. It's one thing for me to hide my own metrics and to report my own experiences. It's quite another for me to write and release a piece of critical software that gets between the user and the corporation, allowing users to feel the difference for themselves, to see how their experience is changed when the metrics are hidden.

When I started this project in 2012, many people thought it was strange or insignificant. Now some of the world's largest tech companies are trying out their own version of it and using language that mirrors my own. Appropriately, we often hear about big shifts coming out of science and technology. But critical viewpoints that emerge through an artistic practice can also move the world in significant ways. It's important to remember that no one field has a monopoly on change.

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