

Topic: Is Social Media a Net Positive for Society?

For the motion (excerpt):

Whenever a new communication technology arrives, the same conversation happens. Print was going to destroy memory. Radio was going to destroy print. Television was going to destroy radio. Each time, the prediction looked plausible. Each time, the technology turned out to add more than it took away. Social media is now in that conversation, and I argue that, like the technologies before it, it is a net positive for society.

Consider organising. The Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, the Hong Kong protests, the climate strikes, none of these movements would have reached the scale they did without platforms that let strangers find each other and coordinate without permission from a state or a newspaper. For groups that have historically been excluded from mainstream media, this is not a marginal benefit. It is the entire game.

Consider access to information. A medical student in a small town now has the same access to current research that a student at Harvard has. A teenager exploring their identity can find a community without leaving their bedroom. A small business can reach customers without buying advertising. The platforms have made expert knowledge, support networks, and customer access available at near zero cost.

Yes, there are harms. Misinformation, mental health effects on teenagers, attention damage. These are real. But the question is not whether harms exist. Every technology has harms. The question is whether the harms outweigh the benefits, and the evidence does not support that they do.

Against the motion (excerpt):

My opponent has chosen the comparisons carefully. Print, radio, and television. None of those are correct comparisons. None of those technologies were optimised, in real time, by algorithms specifically trained to keep human attention regardless of consequence. Social media is a different category, and pretending otherwise is the central trick of the case for the motion.

The harms are not side effects. They are the business model. The platforms make money when users stay longer, and what keeps users longer is outrage, comparison, and fear. This is not an accident the platforms are working to fix. It is the engine they are tuning. To call this a net positive is to look at the benefits, accept the harms as collateral, and refuse to ask whether the harms are designed.

The mental health data on teenagers is now consistent across countries, across platforms, and across the decade since smartphones reached saturation. Anxiety and depression in teenage girls have risen sharply, and the rise tracks the spread of social media platforms with image based feeds. This is not correlation looking for causation. It is causation that has been replicated.

The benefits my opponent listed are real, but they are not unique to social media. Communities of strangers organised before social media. Information was accessible before social media. Small businesses found customers before social media. The platforms made all of those things easier and made other things, deliberately, much worse.

I oppose the motion.