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THE SATURDAY ESSAY

How to Fix Social Media

The Wall Street Journal

Revelations about Facebook, Instagram and TikTok have highlighted the problems posed by the biggest social media sites. What would it take to reform the platforms and limit their harm?

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Sherry Turkle: We Also Need to Change Ourselves

Recent revelations by The Wall Street Journal and a whistleblower before Congress showed that Facebook is fully aware of the damaging effects of its services. The company's algorithms put the highest value on keeping people on the system, which is most easily accomplished by engaging users with inflammatory content and keeping them siloed with those who share their views. As for Instagram, it encourages users (with the most devastating effect on adolescent girls) to curate online versions of themselves that are happier, sexier and more self-confident than who they really are, often at a high cost to their mental health.

But none of this was a surprise. We've known about these harms for over a decade. Facebook simply seemed too big to fail. We accepted the obvious damage it was doing with a certain passivity. Americans suffered from a fallacy in reasoning: Since many of us grew up with the internet, we thought that the internet was all grown up. In fact, it was in its early adolescence, ready for us to shape. We didn't step up to that challenge. Now we have our chance.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, Americans are asking new questions about what is important and what we want to change. This much is certain: Social media is broken. It should charge us for its services so that it doesn't have to sell user

data or titillate and deceive to stay in business. It needs to accept responsibility as a news delivery system and be held accountable if it disseminates lies. That engagement algorithm is dangerous for democracy: It's not good to keep people hooked with anger.

We lose out when we don't take the time to listen to each other, especially to those who are not like us.

But changing social media is not enough. We need to change ourselves. Facebook knows how to keep us glued to our phones; now we need to learn how to be comfortable with solitude. If we can't find meaning within ourselves, we are more likely to turn to Facebook's siloed worlds to bolster our fragile sense of self. But good citizenship requires practice with disagreement. We lose out when we don't take the time to listen to each other, especially to those who are not like us. We need to learn again to tolerate difference and disagreement.

We also need to change our image of what disagreement can look like. It isn't online bullying. Go instead to the idea of slowing down to hear someone else's point of view. Go to images of empathy. Begin a conversation, not with the assumption that you know how someone feels but with radical humility: I don't know how you feel, but I'm listening. I'm committed to learning.

Empathy accepts that there may be profound disagreement among family, friends and neighbors. Empathy is difficult. It's not about being conflict-averse. It implies a willingness to get in there, own the conflict and learn how to fight fair. We need to change social media to change ourselves.

Ms. Turkle is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT and the author, most recently, of "The Empathy Diaries."