The 'unsocial' facets of social media platforms

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The current ubiquitous presence of social media in people's lives on a global scale and the increasing trend of divisionism and polarization fostered in this environment raises an important reflection: How 'social' has this disruptive technology really become?

The sociologist James M. Henslin advocates that 'society makes us humans', and that this process is achieved through social interaction, or living in society and developing ones' self. It is also true that living in society is not without conflicts, misunderstandings, and difficulties, and none of their origins are due to the emergence of social media since they have been established only from the mid-2000s onwards. Nevertheless, while this disruptive technology has experienced an impressive exponential growth rate in the number of monthly active users and revenue, there is also evidence revealing that social media has become a breeding ground for the dissemination of a myriad of unsocial behaviour. Concurrent with this growth, a surge in bigotry, racism, hate speech, xenophobia, cyberbullying, and suicide of young people has also been observed , where social media has not only contributed to their emergence but has also amplified and exacerbated them in alarming proportions. This overall picture has been identified in many countries, such as Brazil, Chile, Italy, Myanmar, Portugal, Spain, the UK, and the US.

Taking into consideration the worrying phenomenon of suicide amongst young people, data reveals that in most cases, disturbing content circulating on social media has played a relevant role in such cases. In other words, distressing online content can potentially amplify young people's lived experiences of depression, emotional instability, low self-esteem, and even encourage them to engage in self-harm practices. Conversely to what some people may think, the online and offline environments are not detached from each other but rather part of the same complex intertwined reality. The impact of attitudes or behaviour performed online is not restricted to that environment but can rather affect people in the offline context. Putting it in another way, words can wound and cause real harm in people's lives, and recent cases of suicide amongst young people influenced by disturbing social media content contribute to corroborate this argument.

In the case of second-generation immigrants, a recent report released by the *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights* reveals that this social group tends to experience more hate-motivated harassment than first-generations do (32% vs 21%). Moreover, according to the *European Commission against Racism and Intolerance*, people exposed to discrimination and intolerance have neither the capacity nor the resources to enforce their rights. And within the social group of second-generation immigrants, it is possible to notice that women comprise a particularly vulnerable social group.

And within this social group of second-generation immigrants, it is possible to notice that women are particularly more vulnerable. In other words, the paradoxical scenario is that even being born and raised in the countries where xenophobic discourses are fostered both online and offline, second-generation immigrant women might be perceived as 'illegitimate' citizens. This distorted negative perception is oftentimes fuelled by extreme nationalist political discourses and amplified by several intersectionality dimensions such as gender, race, class, ethnic origin, affiliation to non-hegemonic religions, hairstyle, and dress code. As these biased views are disseminated and shared on social media, they reach a wide audience of like-minded people and reverberate both online and offline and, in some circumstances even leading towards violent hate crimes. In Germany, for example, a study conducted in 2018 has discovered a strong correlation between anti-refugee speech on social media and physical attacks.

Within this context, leading political figures should be more cautious and aware of the influential aspects of their public statements and their possible impacts and consequences on people's lives. Their leadership position adds a strong symbolic weight to their words and expressed beliefs, in such a way that in the case of hateful, bigotry, xenophobic or divisive discourses, they can potentially validate, legitimate, and endorse negative perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours towards ethnic minority groups. Supporting evidence is found, for example, in the surge of hate crimes against American Muslims, hate crimes against immigrants in the UK after the EU referendum campaign, and extremist political discourses in Italy that have raised concerns regarding increasing assaults on immigrants. This is to say that when a prominent political figure uses social media to post messages conveying ideas such as 'go back to where you came from' directed towards second-generation immigrants, this can instil in the collective mindset the distorted belief that, in fact, that particular social group does not belong there.

In general terms, the dominant logic behind most of the major social media platforms is that users increase their network of 'friends' as much as possible and keep posting engaging content regularly (e.g. texts, videos, images, etc.) that can trigger as many positive reactions as possible. The increasing number of 'likes', 'comments', 'followers', etc. imply endorsement to the content posted and provides a sort of psychological reward for the individuals, which can encourage them to keep posting more content in a quest for more rewards and thus for external approval. As a consequence of this process (which has been coined as 'social-validation feedback loop'), the large corporations and owners of the social media platforms, make fortunes with advertisements. However, within the social media industry itself, this process has also been subjected to strong criticism and considered a way to exploit people's psychological vulnerabilities.

Nonetheless, while a large number of 'friends' on social media platforms might provide some people with a perception of belonging, social acceptance and performing dynamic social interaction, this might not exactly be the case. A recent poll conducted in the UK revealed that the average British social media user has around 554 'friends' online, but in real life, the poll's respondents have said that they can count on no more than five people, which is less than one

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percent of their cohort of online friends. So, while this big number of so-called friends might well be beneficial for the corporations under a business-oriented perspective, for the individuals it might not necessarily provide a truly social experience.

Thus, rather than respect, trust, solidarity, and effective social interaction, the aforementioned array of social phenomena (bigotry, racism, xenophobia, hate speech, etc.) contribute to revealing the worrying unsocial facets of social media platforms. Certainly, these aspects alone do not define social media as a whole and it would not be fair to reduce them to these aspects. Nevertheless, they raise serious concerns indicating that the social disruption, divisionism and polarization created in this environment should not simply be accepted as the new norm in our societies. Firstly, because there have been so many young people severely affected by content that is freely disseminated and shared on these platforms. Secondly, because it can be observed that in several societies second-generation immigrant women have been having their citizenship delegitimized and challenged as if they did not belong there. Finally, because there has been an immense amount of bigotry widely disseminated and shared online creating an almost endless echo-chamber effect. Therefore, it is important not only to question but also to challenge and deconstruct this 'new society' shaped by unsocial social media behaviour before its dominance reaches an irreversible point where this scenario becomes completely normalized and acceptable.

About the Author

Luiz Valério P. Trindade holds a PhD in Sociology by the University of Southampton (UK). His areas of scholarship and research interests encompass the construction and dissemination of hate speech on social media, critical race studies, and social representation of ethnic minorities on means of mass communication.

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