Time off social media may leave you less informed but happier

Within the span of a decade, social media has woven its way deep into our lives. Many use it extensively – the average user spends more than two hours a day on social media – to connect and communicate with each other, to get information, and to entertain themselves. There may be no technology since television that has so dramatically reshaped the way we spend our time.

Early on, platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were hailed for their potential to make communication and the sharing of information easier. Nowadays, many worry about potential harms such as addiction, depression, and political polarisation. Despite the abundance of speculation about the potential effects of social media, hard evidence is relatively scarce.

Evidence from a field experiment

In a recent paper, we provide a large-scale randomised evaluation of the welfare impacts of Facebook, the largest social media platform. We find that deactivating Facebook for one month leads people to spend more time with friends and family. It also leaves them less informed about the news, less polarised in their political opinions, and a little happier and more satisfied with their lives. We find that after the time off Facebook, users want it back, but they use it significantly less than before the "detox". Our findings are in line with other important work on the same topic (see, for example, here and here).

The study design

How did we reach these conclusions? We recruited 1,600 US Facebook users online and randomised them into a "deactivation" and a "control" group. The deactivation group received $102 in exchange for staying off Facebook for the 4 weeks leading up to the US midterm election in November 2018; the control group kept using Facebook as usual. We surveyed both groups about their time use, well-being, news knowledge, and political attitudes twice – once in October, before the beginning of the deactivation period, and once in November, after the deactivation period had concluded. We then compared the changes in those outcomes in the deactivation group to those in the control group.

The findings in detail

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People in the deactivation group adhered to our instructions: we verified deactivation by pinging users' Facebook pages regularly and found that 90% did not reactivate their account in the 4-week period. Being off Facebook freed up an average of **one hour** to spend on other activities. The average participant **spent the extra time offline**, watching more TV and spending more time with friends and family.

Deactivation caused a significant reduction in news consumption and news knowledge: the participants randomised into the deactivation group reported spending an average of 8 minutes (or 15%) **less time consuming news** every day, and they **performed worse on a news quiz** than those in the control group. At the same time, the deactivation group ended up significantly **less polarised** in their attitudes about current news events.

In terms of well-being, we find that Facebook deactivation causes small but **significant increases in self-reported individual life satisfaction and happiness, and significant decreases in self-reported levels of anxiety**. We also elicited self-reported well-being using **daily text messages**, and find positive, though less precise effects of Facebook deactivation on this outcome. Taking all our measures together, we find small, but significant improvements in well-being.

Finally, we measured whether deactivation affected people's demand for Facebook after the study was over, as well as their opinions about Facebook's role in society. As the experiment ended, participants assigned to the deactivation group reported **planning to use Facebook much less in the future**. Several weeks later, the Treatment group's reported usage of the Facebook mobile app was about 11 minutes (22 percent) lower than in Control.

Big picture/take-aways

Our results highlight that many users perceive the benefits of Facebook to be large. Even after a four week "detox," our participants spent substantial time on Facebook every day. The results on news consumption and knowledge suggest that Facebook is an important source of news and information. Our participants' answers in free response questions and follow-up interviews make clear the diverse ways in which Facebook can improve people's lives, whether as a source of entertainment, a means to organise a charity or an activist group, or a vital social lifeline for those who are otherwise isolated. Any discussion of social media's downsides should not obscure the basic fact that it fulfils deep and widespread needs. Notwithstanding, our results also make clear that the downsides are real. We find that four weeks without Facebook improves subjective well-being and substantially reduces post-experiment demand, suggesting that forces such as addiction may cause people to use Facebook more than they otherwise would. We find that while deactivation makes people less informed, it also makes them less polarised by at least some measures, consistent with the concern that social media have played some role in the recent rise of polarisation in the US.

The trajectory of views on social media—with early optimism about great benefits giving way to alarm about possible harms—is a familiar one. Innovations from novels to TV to nuclear energy have had similar trajectories. Along with the important existing work by other researchers, we hope that our analysis can help move the discussion from simplistic caricatures to hard evidence and provide a sober assessment of the way a new technology affects both individual people and larger social institutions.

- *This blog post is based on the authors' paper The Welfare Effects of Social Media, forthcoming in the American Economic Review.*
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Hunt Allcott is an applied microeconomist who studies topics in behavioural economics, environmental economics, public economics, and industrial organization. He is a Senior Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research, an Associate Professor of Economics at New York University, a Research Associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research, and a Co-Editor of the Journal of Public Economics. Professor Allcott received a PhD from Harvard University. Email: hunt.allcott@nyu.edu

Luca Braghieri is a PhD student in economics at Stanford University specialising in behavioural economics and political economy. He holds a BA from Harvard University. Email: lucabrag@stanford.edu.

Sarah Eichmeyer is a PhD student in economics at Stanford University. She works on projects that explore the impacts of new digital technologies on political polarisation, health, and education. She received a master's degree from the University of Zurich, Switzerland. Email: saraeich@stanford.edu.

Matthew Gentzkow is a professor of economics at Stanford University. His work on empirical industrial organisation and political economy with a focus on media industries garnered him the 2014 John Bates Clark Medal, a prize given by the American Economic Association to the American economist under the age of forty who has made the most significant contribution to economic thought and knowledge. Professor Gentzkow holds a PhD from Harvard University. Email: gentzkow@stanford.edu.

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