People over profit: saving social media from big tech

*Dispirited by the polarisation and hatred sown by social media, a group of journalists created a new platform that "holds its participants accountable to facts and decency in conversation". As a social enterprise, the new platform prioritises people over profits. Pixstory's founder and chief executive, **Appu Esthose Suresh**, writes that altering the business model is a key piece of the puzzle that they have managed to solve.*

Have you ever heard of the Tucker 48, an innovative automobile that fleetingly saw the light of day in 1948? Maybe not. In 2021, there is less of a chance that you will have heard of Pixstory, which greeted the world just two months ago. But in many ways, Pixstory is the Tucker 48 of social media.

By the late 1940s, owning a car had become a middle-class aspiration in the United States. As sales soared, so did fatal road accidents. The reason? A lack of safety measures. Car manufacturers knew about these problems yet were loath to invest in safety. Can you imagine building a car today without shatterproof glass? Without a perimeter frame? Without a crash chamber? Preston Tucker, the man behind the Tucker 48, tried to build in safety via simple, elegant design innovations. He introduced a centrally located headlamp that would activate at steering angles of greater than 10 degrees to light the car's path around corners and added a leather cover for use when driving through any of the 17 US states where third headlights were against the law. The Tucker 48 – nicknamed the Torpedo – was ahead of its time, but sadly was blocked in its infancy.

Pixstory is a second-generation social media platform that I and a number of my fellow journalists founded and launched early this year. It is a grand yet simple social experiment: a platform that holds its participants accountable to facts and decency in conversation, and a place "where integrity is your identity". A simple idea, perhaps, but one that seems to be gathering momentum. Pixstory has already attracted the backing of NBA star Dwight Howard, and a clutch of high-net-worth individuals and wealth funds. It is mentored by senior public officials including two former White House officials, a seasoned Japanese diplomat, an Indian technocrat, and three world-class academics, among others.

At Pixstory, we prioritise people over profits. And just like Preston Tucker, we're striving for "creative destruction", but in a radically different way from what was originally theorised by the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter.

Creative destruction, as conceptualised by Schumpeter, is the outcome of an innovation "that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one". In the media sphere, the problem with this kind of creative destruction is that tech giants have an infinite advantage over new entrants to the market, both in technology and free cash flow. Big tech simply copies the features that make new entrants attractive, or buys them out: think Snapchat, and more recently Clubhouse. Just as Snapchat's story feature was copied by Instagram, so both Facebook and Twitter are now testing Clubhouse's audio chat feature. Going up against the big players, innovative tech's chances of success are small. But perhaps – and this is what I and Pixstory's co-founders hope – a radically different kind of creative destruction can change the way social media business runs: namely, by changing the business model. What about a business model that big tech can't copy or doesn't want to copy? How about a business model that prioritises ethics? We think good ethics can be good business, even if we know it won't give the same return on investment. It can't. But that's the trade-off – people, ethics and society over profits.

As a journalist who has seen the proliferation of social media bring all manner of unintended consequences, realising that this trade-off is worth it was my eureka moment. First, I saw that it's possible to challenge big tech, and second, I grasped that technology might not be the solution to the problems invented and magnified by social media. What if the solutions lie in the design?

It's worth reflecting on the key difference between traditional journalism and social media platforms. With all its biases and problems, there was moderation in traditional journalism. The challenge is how you moderate at scale. But in fact, social media does exactly that, all the time. That *is* social media. Even the president of the United States gets corrected by social media audiences. The problem is that social media platforms also let misinformation proliferate. Worse, algorithms recommend and disseminate content rife with misinformation both because it taps into our all-too-human confirmation biases, and because it leads to more engagement, and more advertising revenue. With Pixstory, we feel we really have created the key piece of the jigsaw puzzle: moderation at scale.

I've thought a lot about the difference between an objectively reported story and a social media post. When I started in journalism, our practice was to offer a fair hearing of all sides of a story. We introduced a design feature at Pixstory to achieve this practice online, too – every Pixstory post has a *support* tab and a *challenge* tab. Users create stories that support another user's original post in order to either find common ground or offer a counterpoint, using facts. Everyone is entitled to have different views, but we are not entitled to different facts.

Here's where different streams began to merge at Pixstory, which uses a three-step truth-filter process combining tech, design and moderation. Artificial Intelligence scans through user-uploaded photos, pictures and text to identify and eliminate both hate speech and explicit content. This is an important way that Pixstory differs from other social media platforms that take a deliberately lax approach to explicit content – because it drives engagement.

All Pixstory stories will present an opportunity for a user to see different views. When a story triggers a certain number of challenges, our app's moderators move in to check for verifiable facts. If a story carries verifiable misinformation, we remove it. So, what happens when the subject or stories are not straightforward misinformation? As users achieve a higher integrity score and demonstrate domain expertise, Pixstory reviews their contributions and awards them with a Topic Expert badge. In such scenarios, we intend to draw on the help of our topic experts to make an assessment. Call it a form of transparent peer review.

In a "prisoner's dilemma" game theory modelling of the misinformation mechanism, we realised that two important factors can lead people to cooperate – cost, and shame. With that in mind, our platform's *integrity score* is key. Users' visibility is reduced every time they spread misinformation or a hateful post. Below a certain threshold, they're removed from the platform. Furthermore, because we replace a misinformation story with accurate information, a misinformation spreader's return on efforts is minimised drastically. There are both disincentives and consequences when a Pixstory user goes against community guidelines. In contrast, factual posts serve to increase users' integrity score and visibility.

It is my strong belief, based on what may be anecdotal evidence but coming from a long, close scrutiny of the good, the bad and the ugly of social media interaction, that one of the main reasons for right-wing resentment on social media, and even for the observable tendency for moderates to move rightward toward online hate, is elite gatekeeping. I am in no way suggesting there is no hate speech on the left. But regardless of the place on the ideological spectrum that online hate occupies, if this issue is not addressed, the Pixstory model will fail even if it achieves its overall goals.

We have put equity at the heart of Pixstory and aim to offer recognition for the millions of people who have tremendous knowledge and expertise but who are typically shut out of elite spaces of influence, access to media and public recognition, owing to social, cultural, class and economic factors. These people are core to our *topic-expert* community of Pixstorians. For Pixstory to succeed, its leadership must be committed to honouring the belief that integrity and online identity should be linked.

I want Pixstory to bring about a behavioural change in social media. I want a social media landscape where there are no likes or dislikes, where integrity is more valued than virality. Your Pixstory user experience is not compromised, but your safety is prioritised. Sure, there won't be instant validation – because in real life, our reputations are built over time and worked upon constantly. Pixstory is the real you.

Naturally, I'm always being asked how Pixstory will be economically viable. Let me return to the automobile analogy. In 2019, General Motors' total revenue was $137 billion, and it had a net income of $6.58 billion. Facebook, with half of GM's revenue at $70.67 billion, had three times its net income at $18.5 billion. Social media companies have to start behaving like car manufacturers, and plough money back into safety.

We are living through an age when the problems that social media has amplified and aggravated are clear to see. In a lot of ways, I would argue, Pixstory has a better chance than the late lamented Tucker 48. At the very least, the initial response has shown us that people across the world are looking for a social media alternative. In the two months since its launch, Pixstory has been downloaded nearly 40,000 times from users in 92 countries and featured in one of America's highest-profile television shows, *Good Morning America*.

So, I'm not just optimistic. In fact, I'm convinced that Pixstory's business model – a platform that prioritises accurate, factual, decent interactions – will become the norm a few years from now. Having said that, I also want competition; I'd like other such platforms to emerge and succeed quickly, because we don't have much time. The world needs a reset, and we need it now. And if you're thinking about the value of thinking differently, be sure to watch Francis Ford Coppola's cracking film *Tucker: The Man and His Dream*.

Watch a video about Pixstory here.

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Notes:

- *The author is a fellow at LSE's Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity, International Inequalities Institute.*
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