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The battle to rebuild our social media has started

*The harms of social media platforms – from the mental health of young people to their role in creating rabbit holes for isolated adults who went on to commit atrocities – are well known. But to move forward, writes **Nick Couldry**, we must address the root cause of these problems: the decision to delegate the design of our social spaces, at the most basic level, to profit-seeking businesses.*

On 7 January 2025, Mark Zuckerberg caused widespread dismay when he **announced** that Meta would no longer fund fact-checking of the content that flows across its platforms, at least in the US. Content rules which had constrained offensive speech on Meta platforms were also summarily withdrawn: the **Center for Countering Digital Hate** estimates that almost all restraints on bad content on Meta sites will disappear.

The close alignment between Big Tech bosses and the new Trump administration has been widely noted. In a move whose politics are hard to miss, Mark Zuckerberg implied **in a blog** that he had in Trump a potential ally in the fight against overseas regulators that try to hold back US tech companies – an obvious reference to the EU's regulatory authorities' increasing activism against Meta (and X). **Sam Altman** of Open AI called directly for Trump's support to remove copyright restrictions in his speech to the Paris AI summit.

The battle to redefine Big Tech's relations to regulation and the state is "on", heralding the start of **a new era of oligarchic power**. Meanwhile, for those who don't accept super-rich entrepreneurs' power over social media platforms, the battle is also engaged. In early January the federated comment platform Mastodon announced it was **strengthening its organisational structure** and raising funds to expand its operations and a group of well-known tech figures and celebrities launched the "**Free Our Feeds**" campaign to help fund Bluesky which, like Mastodon, is an open-source platform that is challenging X.

But what exactly is the battle about social media under way here? Why is it needed?

It is not about abandoning social media entirely. But the wider social problems that flow from the highly concentrated corporate infrastructure that supports social media have become increasingly obvious: the evidence that the mental health of young people, especially young girls, has been negatively affected social media; the links between social media content and child suicides; the role that social media have in creating rabbit holes for isolated adults who went on to commit atrocities.

In my recent book – *The Space of the World: Can Human Solidarity Survive Social Media and What if it Can't?* – I ask what lies behind these seemingly disparate scandals and worries, and the corporate structure that underpins them.

The dangers of letting profit-seeking companies design our social spaces

The issue is *not* the smartphone as such. I don't follow those like Jonathan Haidt who want to restrict use of the smartphone. Smartphones have innocent and important uses: finding our route from A to B, knowing when the next bus is coming, looking up something we can't remember on the move.

At the root of our problems with social media is instead a deeper but less noticed mistake: that we delegated to *profit-seeking businesses* what I call “the space of the world”. That is, the spaces where, for much of our time, we carry on our social life: indeed the hyper-space of (almost) *all possible spaces* where we can be social.



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The space of the world is about much more than technology or code: because we spend so much of our time on social media platforms, their space literally is the space in which we live. The Netflix drama *Adolescence* illustrates this with great vividness.

Until recent decades, the space of the world emerged slowly in response to emerging technologies, but no one ever designed or sought to manage it (kings and emperors would have loved to have

that power, but it didn't exist). But that has changed. The possibility of actually *designing* the space of the world only emerged from the opening of the internet and world wide web three decades ago, when every point in space became connected to every other point. This created the risk that bad content from somewhere – from anywhere – might spread more widely. So, what did we do about that risk? We designed platforms that, instead of mitigating the risks of online bad content that were already apparent, worked to *amplify* that risk – for profit.

Over two decades, we have allowed the *wrong* space of the world to be built: one driven by business models that rely on tracking everything we do and from pushing us content that generates “engagement”. What that really means is we are served content which grabs our attention and it is this – our attention in the social media space – which is sold, for profit, to advertisers and other actors willing to pay for it. In short, we have delegated to businesses the profitable exploitation of the social air we breathe.

The Space of the World tries to put into larger perspective the many things going wrong with social media, as well as the good things, and how we might address the problems in a far-reaching, not piecemeal, way.

Why building solidarity is so hard in the current system

One example concerns the evolution of commercial platforms into *polarisation machines* that, for profit, exploit human beings' inherent tendencies to form in-groups and out-groups (the mindset of “us vs them”) – tendencies which social psychology from as far back as half a century ago suggested we should be wary of.

Yes, in the short-term, solidarity can be built online, because of social media's ability to mobilise us quickly. But, for the longer-term, polarising social media platforms work to undermine all forms of authority, and on a global scale. No political theorist ever thought a global scale compatible with civil politics – most national scales have enough problems. The multiple problems with our politics today, while they have additional causes, therefore followed almost inevitably with the advent of the social media platforms that have been built over the past two decades.

The result is that a commercially shaped space of the world makes solidarity ever harder to build. Solidarity means finding a common stake in acting together with people who are *not* like us. Meanwhile, the problems humanity faces (solving which needs *more*, not less, solidarity) get ever more terrifying, above all, the climate emergency and rising global inequality. Yet we are condemned to spend most of our social time on platforms that exploit that time and steer it towards whatever noisy engagement generates profit. We have toxified our common life and our politics.

That is why today we must work to try and reverse these developments. In the book's final chapter, I consider our options. The point is not to abolish social media – as if we could unlearn all the past

two decades have taught us! – but to *rebuild our platforms as if the “social” in social media mattered.*



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Practical models already exist. Federated social media, such as Mastodon and Pixelfed, don't exist to extract data or profit and are built to a smaller scale that can be managed by communities. Bluesky is built on an open-source technical protocol that would allow future federation.

True, federated social media haven't yet taken off on a scale to rival commercial social media. But there's a very clear reason for that. Right now, we don't have a market in social media, just monopolies: when you want to leave a platform, you can't take your contacts or your conversations and images with you! Why not, as [Cory Doctorow](#) and others have suggested, force big platforms to allow the transferability of our contacts and our histories? It's also down to us. Social media are part of our everyday habits, so it's not easy or convenient to imagine changing them. But if we work together, we stand a much better chance, and the foundations have already been laid. Do nothing, and we risk staying within the trap that commercial social media has laid for us, condemned to relive the dangers to our collective social and political life that they pose. In *The Space of the World*, I look at ways to spring that trap and help us rebuild a better social and political world together.

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The Space of the World: Can Human Solidarity Survive Social Media and What if it Can't?, published by Polity, is out now.

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