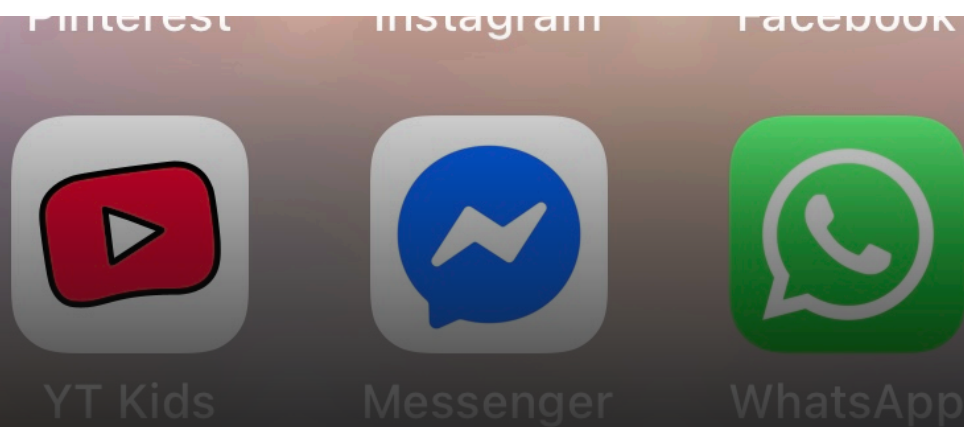




Kirti Dubey

October 28th, 2025

The space of our world: how social media broke solidarity and how we might mend it

*Kirti Dubey, who recently completed her MSc at LSE, writes about Professor Nick Couldry's public lecture that was hosted by LSE's Media and Communication Department on 2 October. Couldry's talk detailed some of the arguments in his recent book, *The Space of the World*, and was followed by a response from Baroness Beeban Kidron.*

Listening to this talk was less like attending an academic event and more like realising the familiar ground I was standing on was not solid earth, but the thin crust of a much deeper, much less stable system. The daily frustrations of the digital world – the misinformation, the polarisation – were no longer just surface cracks, but symptoms of a foundational flaw in how our social space is engineered. Couldry's core argument is deceptively simple, yet its implications are tremendous: we have made a catastrophic error in allowing for-profit big tech corporations to design the very space in which our social life unfolds.

This is not just another critique of echo chambers, misinformation, or screen time. Couldry's thesis cuts deeper, arguing that the primary problem with commercial social media is not merely the content they host, but the fundamental architecture of the social space they have built. He calls this the "space of the world" – the all-encompassing environment resulting from our interactions on digital platforms.

The core argument: a toxic redesign of social space

Couldry illustrates that platforms like Instagram, X and Facebook are not simply digital versions of a "high school cafeteria" (a term used by the **Wall Street Journal** in their articles on the Facebook Files, based on the revelations of whistleblower Frances Haugen.) Couldry argues that this analogy is dangerously misleading: A physical cafeteria has inherent boundaries; conversations are local

and ephemeral; movement is free and untracked. In contrast, the digital space is defined by three toxic properties:

- **Radical Proximity Without Context:** It collapses all distance, bringing content and people from the far corners of the globe directly into our most intimate moments, stripped of any local context or the natural buffers that offline life provides. In simple words, social media takes everything from everywhere, the good, the bad, the angry, the sad, the fake, the ads, and dumps it all right in front of you, all the time, with no filters.
- **Inescapable Surveillance:** Every click, pause, and scroll is tracked, making our “free” movement the primary input for an algorithmic system that will, in turn, shape what we see next.
- **The Engagement-at-Any-Cost Engine:** This space is governed by a single, relentless business model: maximise engagement to sell attention to advertisers. It is agnostic to truth, solidarity, or well-being; it simply seeks to make us “jump up and down” in reaction to content, regardless of its quality.

This engineered environment, Couldry contends, has created a crisis in our collective behaviour. It acts as a “polarisation machine,” exploiting our innate tribal psychology by encouraging us to signal group identity and then feeding the ensuing conflict. It industrialises gossip, allowing falsehoods to spread faster and farther than truth, eroding the common ground democracies need to function. Most devastatingly, it systematically dismantles the boundaries and bridges that a healthy society requires.

This point struck with me. We cannot socialise children, build trust, or foster deep community without boundaries. At the same time, we cannot solve global problems like the climate crisis or migration without building bridges of solidarity across those same communities. Commercial social media, in their relentless pursuit of scalable engagement, destroy both. They blur the contexts of our lives (a conversation with a friend is now visible to a parent and an advertiser) while simultaneously segregating us into algorithmically-fueled affective tribes, making genuine, cross-community solidarity nearly impossible.

Helplessness and hope

Baroness Kidron, while responding to Couldry, described what many of us in the audience were feeling – a sense of helplessness. She argued that for years, we’ve been treating the symptoms, through fact-checking, promoting digital literacy, lamenting political division, without diagnosing the root disease: a poisoned well. We’ve been trying to fix the water instead of questioning the industrial waste being dumped upstream.

Although Couldry's diagnosis is highly valuable, Kidron contended that his prescriptions can feel simultaneously too ambitious and not ambitious enough. The call to dismantle the toxic business model, break up commercial players, and foster non-profit, community-scaled alternatives feels both morally right and politically insurmountable. In a world where tech giants wield power equal to, and in some cases greater than, that of nations, where do we even begin?

Yet, this is where my reflection finds a foothold for hope in terms of reclaiming space. Kidron's crucial insight was that every piece of successful regulation of tech giants – from age verification to safety-by-design features – is a "proof point." It proves that the current digital space is not an inevitable force of nature but a design choice. We can impose human values on this technology. The question is not one of possibility, but of political will and collective action.

Furthermore, her call to "smash tech exceptionalism" by applying existing domain regulation – treating platforms as the publishers, financiers, or public utilities they functionally are – is a pragmatic and powerful next step. It moves the debate from the abstract to the tangible.

A way forward

So, where does this leave us, the users adrift in this misconnected space? Couldry's final suggestion focuses on the human: start where solidarity still exists. Start offline. In our local schools, sports clubs, and community centres, we can begin the work of reclaiming our social lives. We can consciously choose and advocate for non-profit platforms like Mastodon, Bluesky, not because they are perfect, but because they are built on a different logic – one of community, not extraction.

An interesting statistic cited in the talk was that nearly half of young Britons said they would prefer to grow up in a world without the internet. This sounds, as Couldry said in the lecture, less like a Luddite fantasy and more like a cry of pain, a gesture towards a needed, if seemingly impossible, world. It tells us that the current digital world is failing our generation.

The task ahead is not to abandon the digital realm, but to rebuild it. It is to collectively decide that the space of our world – the environment for our friendships, our politics, and our children's development – is too important to be left to the whims of a profit-maximising algorithm. The challenge is monumental, but as Couldry and Kidron have said, the first step is to see the problem clearly. We are not helpless; we have simply been looking at the wrong problem. The fight is not just over what we see online, but over the very walls, rules, and ownership of the room we're all now forced to inhabit. Reclaiming that space is the essential political and social task of our time.

You can watch or listen to a recording of the lecture [here](#), and find out more about Couldry's book [here](#). This article represents the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

About the author



Kirti Dubey

Kirti Dubey is an M.Sc. (Data & Society) student in the Department of Media and Communications. Before joining LSE, she was a journalist covering politics, human rights, and social justice in India. Currently transitioning into policy and technology, she focuses on the intersection of human rights and AI governance. She is passionate about ethical technology and social impact and explores ways to shape policies that promote fairness, accountability, and human rights in the digital age.

Posted In: Communication Technology



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

© LSE 2025