

Over this past year where our main point of contact with each other has been through the screen of our digital devices, we saw video-communication software becoming our new offices, and social media our public space. In the case of the latter, it has been our online public space for the last decade or so, however, for the first time, it became our only resource for social connection.

During this period, I have found myself reflecting on social media, and analyzing its effects on my personal well-being, but also in regards to society in general. I have always been critical of social media and its impact in our everyday-lives. It baffles me when people see it as mere online platforms, almost like a side dish in the meal of the real world and society.

As social individuals, we are expected to adhere to certain norms of conduct, including morals and common sense. In social media however, such etiquette is thrown out of the window, with some agents untethering hateful, fake and harmful content that is then exacerbated by popularity algorithms designed to appeal to strong emotions on their use-base.

This situation led me to actively search for such material and report it through the appropriate tools these platforms provide. I also shared the details with my friends and asked them to do the same, and a lot of them happily did so. Through this experiment I learned that the filters provided to classify such content were either too broad or too specific, almost resembling to an attempt to deter users from the process. The most frustrating aspect however, was that platforms would rarely act on such submissions, instead providing an opaque feedback about it “likely” not being against their rules, and suggesting to block the perpetrator. For the sake of clarity, I know that what I reported was not subjective or opinion-based: it was blatant racism, sexism and anti-semitism, topped with fake headlines and memes. Most importantly, I don’t wish to block it, I want it removed because it is purely not acceptable.

In the past years we have been confronted with the dangers of hate speech in society, and we have seen how it not only affects individuals, but also whole countries and democracies.

Thanks to social media we have seen the rise of social movements, and exposed vile atrocities, such as police violence in regards to black people in the US. We have also seen the rise of conspiracy theories, and hate disguised as free speech, being the president of the US one of its biggest enablers. How can we address such problems? When can we finally understand that social media and society are one, and that if hate is not addressed online, we will not have a civil society?

As we continue home-bound and bracing ourselves for a second lockdown, I have come to the realization that I don’t need the public space of social media. I removed the apps from my phone for a few months now, and still feel as connected as ever. Sure I might miss the latest viral post and its week-long lifespan, but in my view, it just makes me a week ahead of everyone else.