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Should we be worried about how technology is changing the human condition?

Fears about algorithms designed for addiction, advances in AI are grounded in recent revelations about corporate greed and government surveillance.

Revelations and possibility of Change:

1. Due to a whistleblower we know, the degree to which Facebook is aware of, and causes, deep social and political harm. We now know about Facebook and government encroachment on individual rights.



2. Haugen's revelations underline three basic points. First, those running social media are not ill-intentioned per se. But their moral ambivalence towards the consequences of their products and the agnosticism that is built into the design of the algorithms has made it so that they may as well be.
3. Take, for instance, the effect of Instagram on the mental health of adolescent girls, or the role WhatsApp and Facebook have played in promoting ethnic violence in places as diverse as Myanmar, parts of Africa and India.
4. Haugen has provided documents that show that the corporation that runs all three apps was well aware of these consequences — and yet, it did little to stop them.
5. Second, there is no “good” way, no market-based solution that offers a plausible way out. The apps are so deeply intertwined with how we live and work (just look at the crippling effect a seven-hour shutdown of all of Facebook's apps had on October 5) that a competitor is likely to fill in the space vacated by any one company.
6. Finally, it is naive to believe in any substantial form of self-regulation. Simply put, social media's entire architecture is based on maximising screen time and the data so collected.

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7. What the algorithm does is find what will keep people hooked the most, and for the longest — the actual content doesn't matter. Expecting social media giants to regulate the very thing that their profits are based on is like asking drug dealers to prioritise rehab clinics.

Self-regulation or the government regulation

1. Unfortunately, the actions of even democratically-elected governments often inspire little confidence. Take just two recent examples — the Pegasus snooping scandal and the Arsenal Consulting findings.
2. From both, it seems clear that for many governments, including ours, the use of technology to breach individual rights is not incidental to a larger goal — as in the case of social media companies — but an intrinsic part of how they function.
3. Forget the fact that the Government of India appears to be the only national government that has not been shaken by the Pegasus scandal. What is more significant is that governments can now deploy “zero-click” spyware that can easily bypass security mechanisms.
4. And that such capabilities have been deployed against journalists, political friends and opponents, defence personnel, businessmen — citizens with an inalienable right to privacy and dignity. Unfortunately, the Pegasus scandal is only the tip of the iceberg.
5. Given that governments have at least as much interest in maintaining power as corporations do in making profits, they can hardly be expected to be impartial arbiters of the limits of technology.