OFF THE HOOK

Entertainment and News Coverage Rarely
Blame Tech Corporations for
Social Media Harms

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Blame Tech Corporations for Social Media Harms

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The **Media Impact Project** is the research and evaluation arm of the **Norman Lear Center**, based at USC's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. We study the content of stories disseminated through media and entertainment, the audiences who engage with these stories, and their impact on knowledge, attitudes, and behavior.

www.learcenter.org/technology

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BACKGROUND

Public discourse around the negative impacts of social media often focuses on children and youth. The latest example is the 2025 British TV series *Adolescence* which harrowingly dramatizes the effects of misogynistic online content and cyberbullying on a thirteen-year-old boy and his family.[1]

Yet the harms of social media are not limited to children and teens; they range from the proliferation of hate speech and disinformation that threaten democracy to enabling crime, fraud, and even genocide.[2] Experts describe how technology corporations profit from harvesting users' private information and deploying algorithms that prioritize addictive engagement at all costs, including the amplification of lies and hateful, dehumanizing, and violent rhetoric.[3]

Despite this, there is not enough known about how these harms—and the corporate practices that allow them—are represented in news and entertainment; nor, whether audiences are aware of these harms and desire stories that address structural causes and potential solutions.

To begin to fill these gaps, the USC Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project conducted a multi-method study with support from Luminate.

We found that the negative impacts of social media and technology receive substantial coverage in both news and entertainment. However, harms to children and youth are prioritized over impacts on other groups and society at large, and the responsibility of corporations in causing and addressing these harms is rarely discussed.

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1   *Adolescence* was released too late (March 2025) to be included in this research.

2   The Wall Street Journal. (n.d.). *The Facebook files:* A *Wall Street Journal investigation*. https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039;
Amnesty International. (2022). *Myanmar: The social atrocity: Meta and the right to remedy for the Rohingya*. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa16/5933/2022/en/

3   Global Witness. (2023, September 15). *A world of online hate and lies: Mapping our investigations into social media platforms' failure to tackle hate and disinformation.* https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/a-world-of-online-hate-and-lies-mapping-our-investigations-into-social-media-platforms-failure-to-tackle-hate-and-disinformation/;
CNBC Television. (2022, April 21). *Former President Obama speaks on disinformation's threat to democracy* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExEApwbhfqQ

Across the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, three western countries that are culturally influential and have different regulatory approaches to social media and technology, we examined:

- **Audience beliefs, exposure & preferences**
  - <u>Survey:</u> How do public audiences across the three countries understand the potential harms of social media? How often do they see these topics covered in the news and entertainment they engage with, and what is their appetite for such coverage?

- **News coverage of social media and technology**
  - <u>TV news frequency analysis:</u> How often are key terms related to social media and technology mentioned in TV news? How often are they mentioned in conjunction with intersecting topics such as children and youth or democracy?
  - <u>Print news thematic analysis:</u> What are the main themes through which social media and technology are discussed in print news?

- **Social media in scripted entertainment**
  - <u>Thematic analysis:</u> How is social media discussed in scripted TV and film content? What types of harms are portrayed, and how are the causes of and solutions to these harms framed, if at all?

AUDIENCE BELIEFS, EXPOSURE & PREFERENCES

WHAT WE DID

We recruited 500 adults each from the US, UK, and France to complete an online survey in February 2025. Questions pertained to beliefs about social media, media consumption and preferences, exposure to media addressing social media harms, and interest in related fictional content.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Across the three countries, audience members believe...

Social media has both positive and negative impacts on individuals and society.

- Overall, audiences believe social media platforms are more of a benefit (24-45%) or equally beneficial and a threat (37-42%) to individuals, local communities, marginalized groups, and society.
- At the same time, more than 85% of audience members believe social media contributes at least "a little" to a wide range of harms, including mental health problems among youth and adults; dangerous fads and self-harming behaviors; the silencing of ideas and individuals; and anger, discrimination, and loneliness.

They hear about the harms of social media...

The majority report hearing about the harms of social media in news and entertainment.

- Most indicated they have seen entertainment content addressing these harms, including in fictional TV shows/films (81%), reality TV shows (74%), and documentaries (83%).
- Exposure to the harms of social media is higher in news, including TV news/talk shows (88%), newspapers/news magazines (81%), and radio news/talk shows/podcasts (80%).
- More than 80% of respondents reported seeing or hearing news coverage of social media harms, including to children (60%), young adults (57%), society (45%), women (37%), and marginalized groups (29%).
- More than half of US respondents (53%) saw or heard news coverage of harms to society, compared to 39% in the UK and 43% in France.

The majority report hearing coverage of harm-reduction actions in both fictional entertainment and news.

- Nearly three in four have seen or heard news coverage of actions that can be taken to reduce the harms of social media, including by the government (43%), individuals (42%), and technology corporations (36%).
- More US and UK respondents (over 40%) than French respondents (24%) have seen or heard news coverage about actions technology corporations can take to reduce harm.
- Respondents have at least "occasionally" seen fictional TV shows address harm reduction actions by individuals (58%), technology corporations (54%), or the government (53%). Specific content mentioned includes *The Social Dilemma*, *Unfriended*, *13 Reasons Why*, *Black Mirror*, and *Cyberbully*.

Audiences have an appetite for these types of stories...

Over 80% have expressed "any" interest in watching dramatic stories about the potential harms of social media in different genres. Regarding the genres in which they would like to see this coverage:

- About 20% indicated they are "very" interested in seeing such stories in comedy (22%), thriller (20%), action adventure (19%), or legal drama/courtroom/police procedural (19%).
- Younger and self-identified liberal audiences show the most interest in these types of stories overall.

Audiences have a particular interest in stories about ordinary individuals taking on tech giants.

- For example: *"a show about the takedown of big tech corporations for manipulation of data and algorithms."*
- Among a list of sample storyline ideas, audiences were most interested in *"a whistleblower risking it all to expose a social media giant's dark secret features designed to fuel addiction, anger, and extremism"* and *"a young female politician, battling online harassment and deepfake attacks, decides to fight to pass bold laws that stop tech giants from profiting off her pain."*

NEWS COVERAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA & TECHNOLOGY

Our survey indicated the majority of audience members hear about social media harms from a variety of news sources, including TV and print news. We set out to establish how often TV and print news outlets in the US, UK, and France talk about social media and technology and the messages they convey.

WHAT WE DID: TV NEWS

In collaboration with Luminate, we identified high-reach TV news outlets across the political spectrum: 17 in the US, 14 in the UK, and 12 in France. During the six-month period from August 2024 through January 2025, we searched transcripts for 40 keywords related to technology platforms, leadership figures (e.g., Mark Zuckerberg), and associated issues (e.g., disinformation, algorithm).

KEY TAKEAWAYS: TV NEWS

There were over 400,000 mentions of social media and technology-related keywords…

The most frequently mentioned keywords in all countries were "social media," "X," and "Elon Musk," which accounted for nearly half (49%) of all mentions.

- In the US, "TikTok" was the next most talked about keyword, while UK news frequently mentioned "You-Tube," and "plateformes" (which is synonymous with social media) was high in France.
- Elon Musk and his platform X (formerly known as Twitter) dominated discourse, accounting for more than a quarter of all keyword mentions.[4] Musk was mentioned more than nine times as frequently as Zuckerberg, the next most talked about tech figure.
- Only 10% of all mentions pertained to social media harms and related issues. Among these, "misinformation," "disinformation," and "fake news" accounted for nearly 80% of all issue-based keyword mentions. Keywords describing systemic issues related to social media and technology (i.e., surveillance capitalism, attention economy) had less than 50 combined mentions across all countries' news stations.
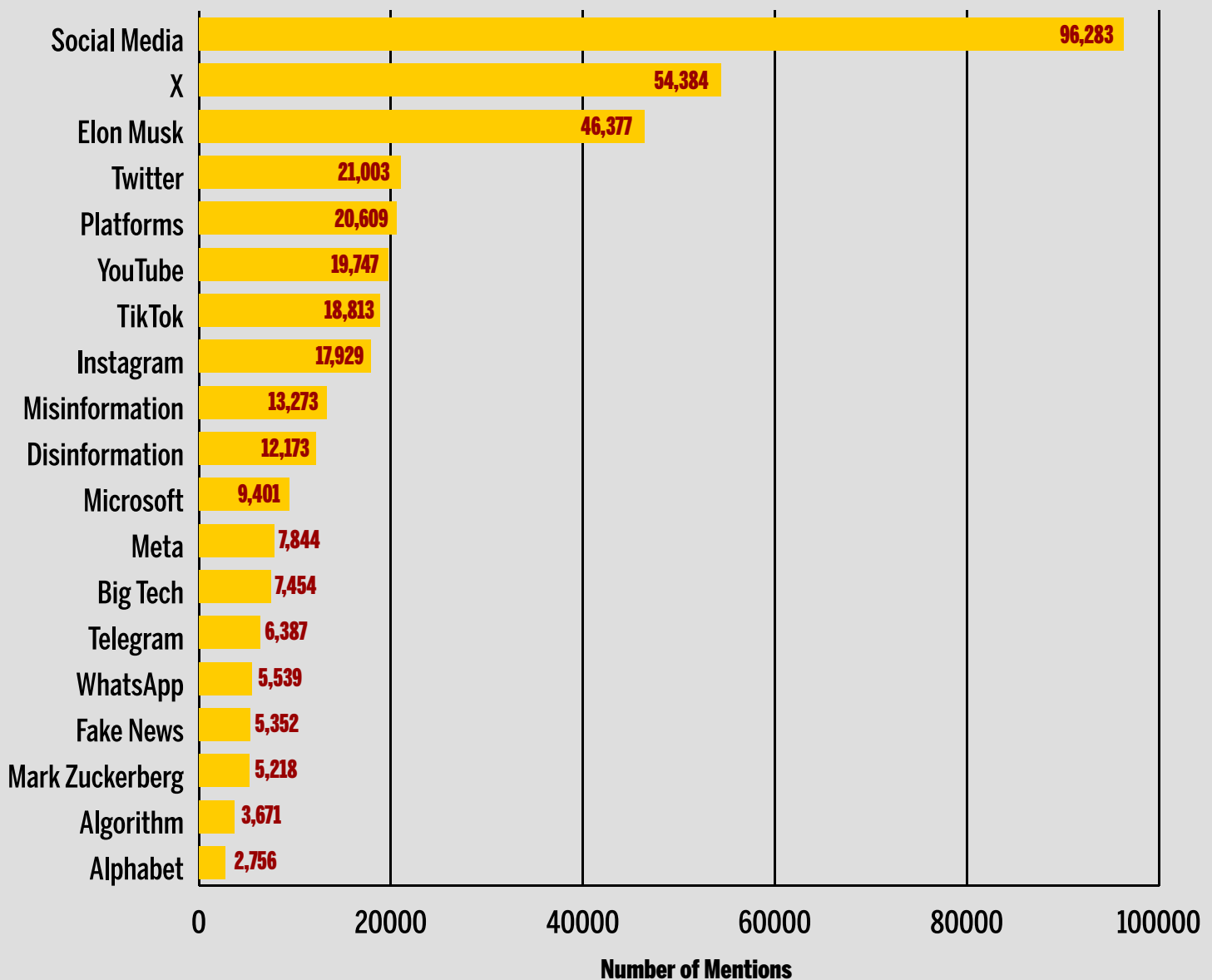
Coverage of social media in conjunction with intersecting topics was relatively rare…

About one-in-four TV news mentions were associated with one or more intersecting topics. Children and youth was the most common, appearing alongside 21,000 keyword mentions (5% of all mentions).

- Other intersecting topics included *health* (2%), *data* (2%), *elections* (1%), *censorship* (1%), and *democracy* (1%).

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4   During the six-month analysis period, Musk played a prominent role in the US presidential election, transition period, and the early days of the Trump administration, as the head of the "Department of Government Efficiency."

- *Profit*—associated with 1% of all keyword mentions—was the only topic among the top 20 that suggested a structural cause of social media harm.
- Various solution-focused topics, such as *antitrust* laws or the *Digital Services Act* (European Union), received little coverage, associated with less than 0.5% of all keyword mentions.

Figure 1.

20 Most Frequently Mentioned Keywords in TV News

Keyword	Number of Mentions
Social Media	96,283
X	54,384
Elon Musk	46,377
Twitter	21,003
Platforms	20,609
YouTube	19,747
TikTok	18,813
Instagram	17,929
Misinformation	13,273
Disinformation	12,173
Microsoft	9,401
Meta	7,844
Big Tech	7,454
Telegram	6,387
WhatsApp	5,539
Fake News	5,352
Mark Zuckerberg	5,218
Algorithm	3,671
Alphabet	2,756

Number of Mentions

WHAT WE DID: PRINT NEWS

With Luminate, we selected fifteen print newspapers (five in each country[5]) to maximize digital subscribers,

viewpoint diversity, and inclusion of both regional and national outlets.[6] We searched each paper's online archive for mentions of the terms "social media," "Big Tech," and "algorithm" between October 2017 and February 2025, identifying the ten most relevant (per Google search) articles in each paper (150 total). Using a combination of human coding and linguistic analysis software, we examined the tone, issues addressed, and individual vs. systemic framing of social media harms.

KEY TAKEAWAYS: PRINT NEWS

Across the three countries, the tone of print news coverage of social media was largely negative…

The articles we analyzed were significantly more negative than the average *New York Times* science article.[7]

- 90% of the articles *focused on* (i.e., devoted the bulk of the story to) problems or harms associated with social media use.
- About a third (37%) quoted a representative or spokesperson from a technology company, suggesting that the bulk of the articles were not complimentary "puff pieces" about Big Tech.
- Of the sources quoted, 70% are men and only 16% are people of color. Nearly half (46%) work in government, 23% in academia, 16% in the private sector, and 15% in the nonprofit sector.
- Only 5% of articles included at least one personal story from a regular person who was negatively affected. For example, an article in *USA Today* quotes a mother: *"The algorithms that drive Instagram and TikTok nearly killed my daughter Mariam. Curious about healthy eating, social media sucked her into a black hole of dangerous content like how to eat less than 500 cals a day or challenges to prove extreme thinness."*

The majority of articles addressed harms associated with social media…

Most articles (90%) addressed one or more social problems associated with social media and technology.

- Articles specifically focused on "censorship" of conservative voices (11%), child safety (9%), privacy concerns (9%), political disinformation (8%), the compensation of news outlets for content (7%), and the breaking up of monopolies (7%).
- Many articles (18%) did not focus on one specific type of harm, but rather addressed a variety of harms.
- British articles were significantly more likely to focus on conservative "censorship" (22%), while no French articles in our sample had this focus. French articles were more likely to focus on privacy concerns (18%) than those from the US (6%) or UK (2%).
- Articles about political disinformation and compensation of news outlets by Big Tech companies were significantly more likely to appear in left-leaning newspapers.

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6   Outlets were categorized as left- or right-leaning based on input from Luminate and secondary sources.

7   The linguistic analysis software LIWC uses a dictionary of terms to calculate tone and includes a corpus of 18,312 *New York Times* science articles.

Figure 2.

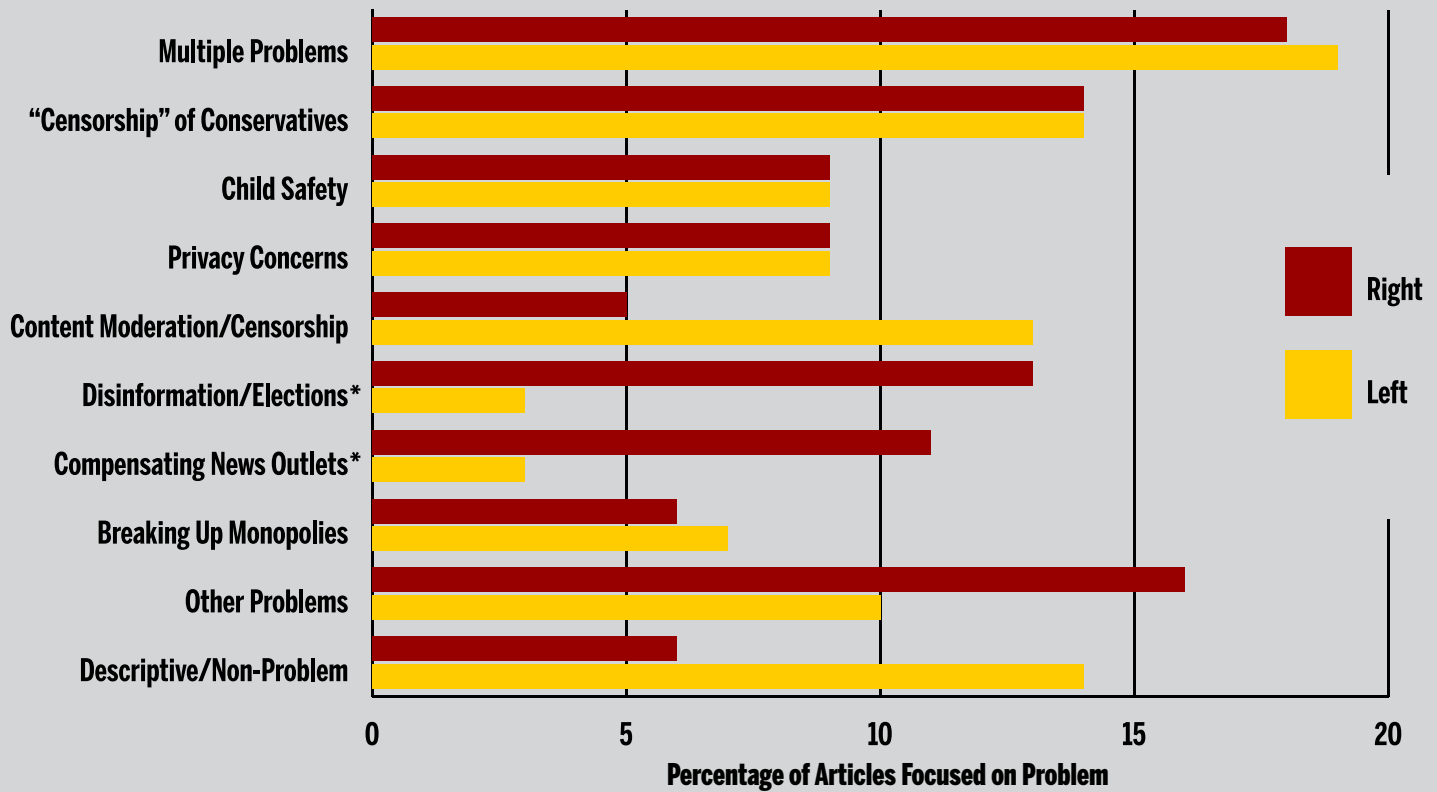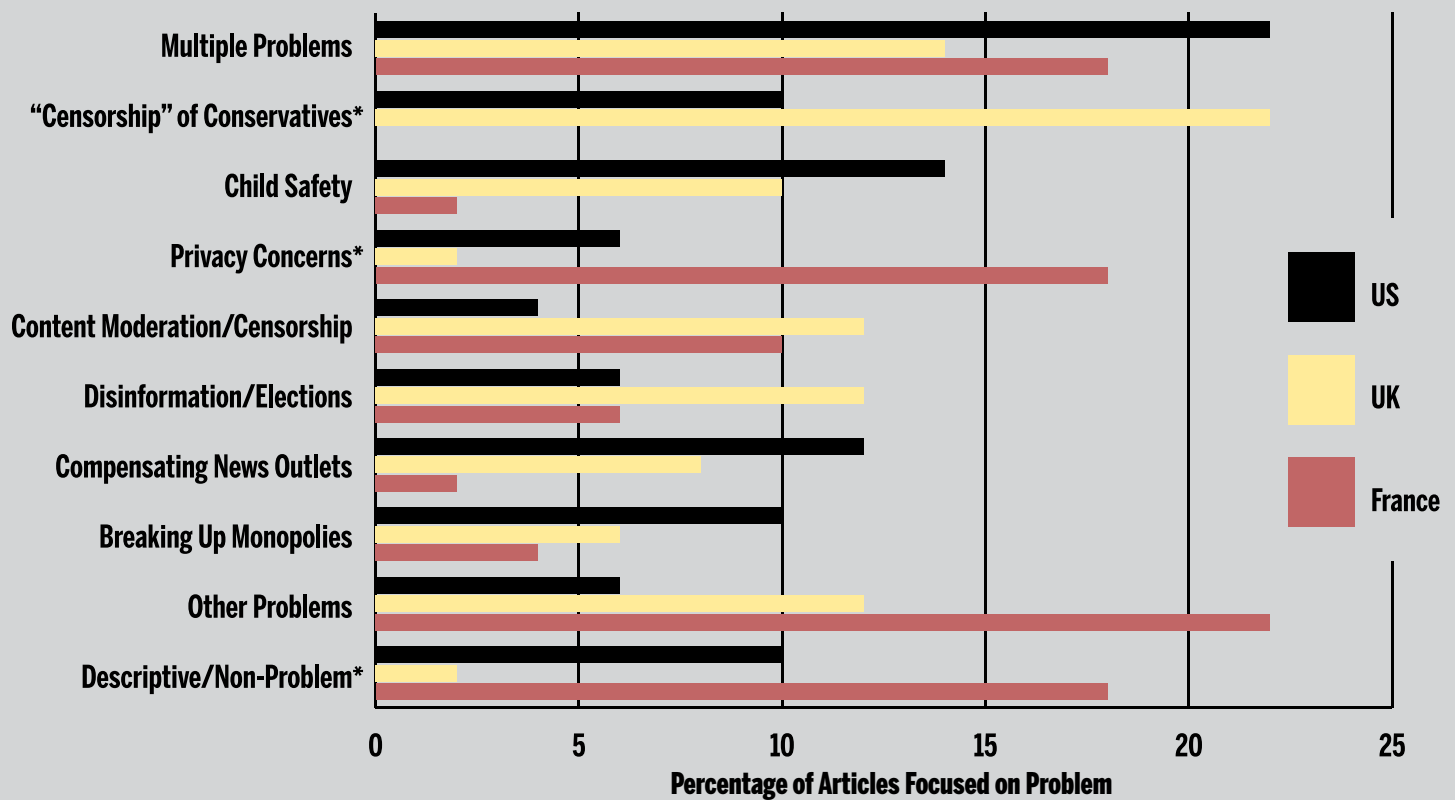Print News Article Focus, Left vs. Right-Leaning Outlets

Percentage of Articles Focused on Problem

Legend:
- Right
- Left

Categories (top to bottom): Multiple Problems, "Censorship" of Conservatives, Child Safety, Privacy Concerns, Content Moderation/Censorship, Disinformation/Elections*, Compensating News Outlets*, Breaking Up Monopolies, Other Problems, Descriptive/Non-Problem

Figure 3.

Print News Article Focus, by Country

Percentage of Articles Focused on Problem

Legend:
- US
- UK
- France

Categories (top to bottom): Multiple Problems, "Censorship" of Conservatives*, Child Safety, Privacy Concerns*, Content Moderation/Censorship, Disinformation/Elections, Compensating News Outlets, Breaking Up Monopolies, Other Problems, Descriptive/Non-Problem*

*indicates significant difference at p < .05

Discussions of tech-related problems were more likely to focus on financial motives such as profit than political tactics such as lobbying.

- More than two thirds (67%) of articles mentioned key sources of harm, including profit motive (35%), algorithms (33%), monopoly power (28%), lobbying tactics (11%), NetChoice[8] (5%), and "Big tobacco" denial tactics (3%).

<mark>**Solutions to social media harms were mentioned frequently...**</mark>

A majority of articles (60%) mentioned legislation or government regulation as a systemic solution.

- Specific legislation mentioned included antitrust legislation (14%), the EU's Digital Services Act (11%) and Digital Markets Act (8%), and the US's Kids Online Safety Act (4%).
- Other proposed solutions included deregulation (*The Sun*), new technology tools like the Unfollow Everything app (*New York Times*), and unionization to address data privacy and labor issues (*Liberation*).

SOCIAL MEDIA IN SCRIPTED ENTERTAINMENT

The vast majority of survey respondents have heard about potential harms of social media from fictional TV shows and films. We set out to understand how frequently these topics are discussed in scripted TV and film, and how they are framed when they do appear.

WHAT WE DID

We gathered transcripts from publicly available sources and searched them for 40 technology-related keywords from 2015-2024. French content had about one tech-related keyword mentioned in every four transcripts, on average, while English-language content had double that amount.

We limited our sample to 100 episodes (refers to both TV episodes and films) based on how many times the term "social media" (or "réseaux sociaux") appeared. Because US content was vastly overrepresented, the threshold for UK and French content was lower. We excluded 24 episodes with only incidental social media-related content, leaving a final sample of 76 (57 TV episodes, 19 films) 61 from the US, eight from France, and seven from the UK.

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8   NetChoice is a conservative-leaning trade association and lobbying group that advocates on behalf of technology corporations for deregulation.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Of 76 TV episodes and films with substantial content related to social media...

Thirty-three (43%) portrayed social media as neutral or positive overall.

- For example, *The Paynes* (US) shows social media being used to successfully advertise a small business, while *The Bold Type* (US) portrays a young American woman using social media to foster diversity at a magazine company.
- *Death in Paradise* (UK) illustrates how social media can be a helpful tool for law enforcement.

Forty-three (57%) portrayed social media as primarily negative or causing problems.

- Crime/legal procedurals accounted for just 32% of the analyzed episodes, but nearly half (44%) of the episodes portrayed social media as negative or causing a problem.
- The most commonly depicted problems associated with social media included online harassment, misinformation, public humiliation, and the toxic pursuit of fame.

Of the 43 TV episodes and films that portrayed social media negatively...

Most portrayed harms as being caused by individuals, rather than social media companies.

- Thirty-seven episodes framed negative social media impacts as a result of character flaws. For instance, an episode of *Magnum PI* (US) attributes harm to "standard teen idiocy."
- Only six episodes implicated real or fictional social media companies as partially responsible for causing harm. For instance, an episode of *The Good Fight* (US) shows how a social media company manipulates their algorithm to hide certain kinds of inconvenient political speech.

Few offered concrete solutions, and individual-centered solutions dominated.

- Twenty-seven episodes did not suggest any concrete solutions to a social media-related problem. These episodes tended to frame social media harms as inevitable or unsolvable. For example, an episode of *Instinct* (US) states "You can't control social media."
- Sixteen episodes suggested individual-centered solutions. For example, an episode of *Détox* (France) features characters who decide to do a "phone detox" to reduce the harmful psychological effects of social media overuse, while an episode of *CSI: Cyber* suggests that parents ought to educate their children to "make better decisions" when using social media.
- These findings are at odds with audience perceptions that fictional entertainment at least "occasionally" discusses actions corporations and governments can take to reduce harm.

There were notable exceptions, however, showing characters demanding structural changes.

- Four episodes suggested systemic solutions to social media harms. For example, an episode of *The Good Fight* (US) mentions "an independent tribunal, a social media Supreme Court, to guide us toward greater

transparency and accountability."

- Only one episode (*South Park,* US) showed ordinary people collectively organizing to help create a systemic solution: the children organize a bake sale to help fund the Danish content moderation program: "we should all come together…as a school."

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STORYTELLERS

1. **Craft stories that illustrate the wide range of harms associated with social media.**
While youth are often the focus of negative media coverage, they are not the only group that suffers. Consider elevating stories covering the less visible impacts of social media and technology on marginalized communities, climate change, or public health.

2. **Draw attention to the key drivers of harm.**
In addition to naming real technology companies, journalists and creatives could highlight tech corporations' business practices and algorithmic functions that underlie these effects. One survey respondent proposed a story about "a powerhouse company that manipulates user behavior, controls public narratives, and even exploits personal data to stay ahead of competitors."

3. **Avoid portraying tech industry leaders as singular heroes or villains.**
Consider how stories about individual leaders can be connected to the harmful business models and surveillance economies these leaders have designed and from which they profit. Audiences are particularly interested in first-hand accounts from insiders or whistleblowers.

4. **Flip the script on common industry practices.**
Journalists, who are accustomed to highlighting systemic problems, might consider lifting up the personal stories of those most affected. Entertainment creators, who are exceptionally skilled at telling character-driven stories, have an opportunity to show how corporations' practices constrain and drive individual choices.

5. **Show ordinary people working together to generate systemic change.**
"Gloom-and-doom" stories can make people feel like complex problems aren't solvable. Consider modeling the kinds of collective engagement and coalition-building that might inspire audiences to imagine and co-create a better future.