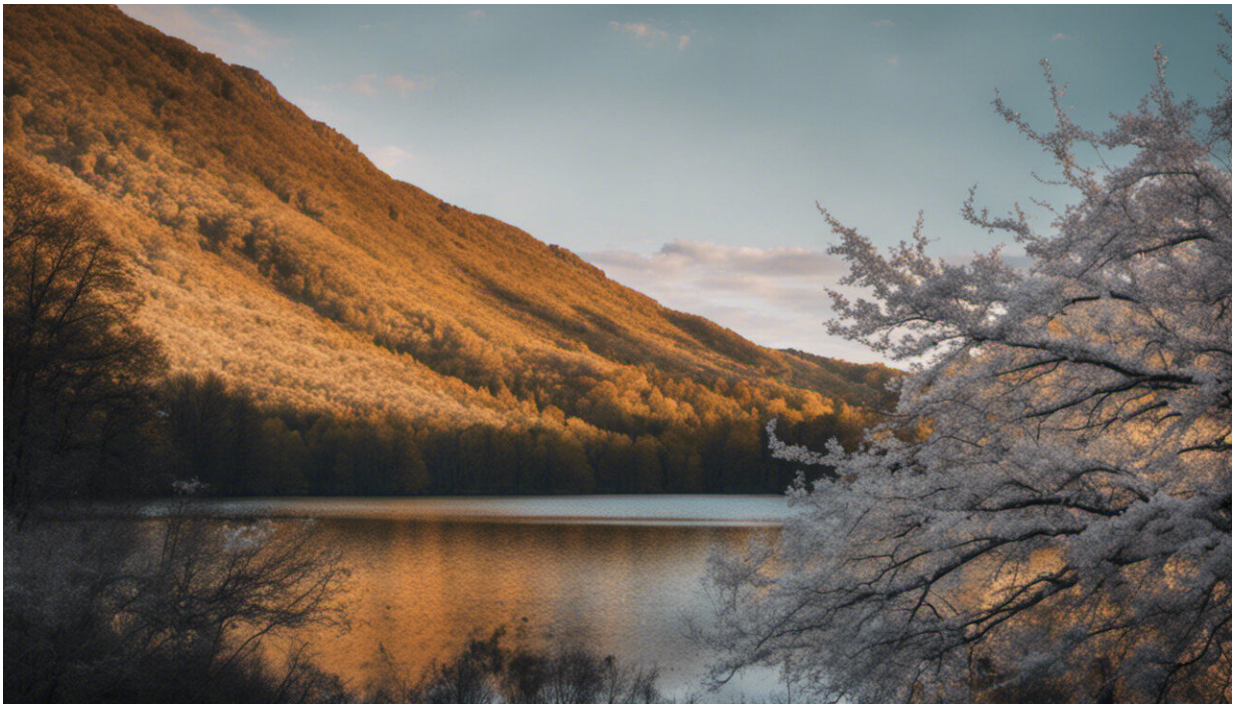


# Your next social network could pay you for posting

January 25 2017, by Jelena Dzakula

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

You may well have found this article through Facebook. An algorithm programmed by one of the world's biggest companies now [partially controls](#) what news reaches 1.8 billion people. And this algorithm has come under attack for censorship, political bias and for creating bubbles that prevent people from encountering ideas they don't already agree

with.

Now a new kind of social network is emerging that has no centralised control like Facebook does. It's based on blockchain, the technology behind Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies, and promises a more democratic and secure way to share content. But a closer look at how these networks operate suggests they could be far less empowering than they first appear.

Blockchain has received an enormous amount of hype thanks to its use in online-only cryptocurrencies. It is essentially a ledger or a database where information is stored in "blocks" that are linked historically to form a chain, saved on every computer that uses it. What is revolutionary about it is that this ledger is built using cryptography by a network of [users](#) rather than a central authority such as a bank or government.

Every computer in the network has access to all the blocks and the information they contain, making the blockchain system more transparent, accurate and also robust since it does not have a single point of failure. The absence of a central authority controlling blockchain means it can be used to create more democratic organisations owned and controlled by their users. Very importantly, it also enables the use of smart contracts for payments. These are codes that automatically implement and execute the terms of a legal contract.

Industry and governments are developing other uses for blockchain aside from digital currencies, from streamlining back office functions to managing health data. One of the most recent ideas is to use blockchain to create alternative social networks that avoid many of the problems the likes of Facebook are sometimes criticised for, such as censorship, privacy, manipulating what content users see and [exploiting those users](#).

Most of these services are in pilot stages but one, [Steemit](#), has been

successfully operating for a number of months and its user numbers have [grown significantly](#). Its main function is as a content-sharing site where posts are ranked by popularity, similar to [Reddit](#), although it has recently added a private messaging function and the ability to follow specific users.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Perhaps its most important feature is the way users are rewarded. Every time they produce or share content, they receive Steem tokens, which are like shares in the organisation. These can be exchanged for any real-world currency or used to vote on how the platform will develop, giving users governance power.

Steemit doesn't control or own user data since it is stored using

blockchain and so it doesn't sell the data to third parties such as advertisers. Being built on publicly available and visible blockchain technology prevents any form of censorship and discrimination in the system. The network doesn't filter what content users see with an algorithm – posts are ranked by pure popularity – and there is no central entity that can manipulate or censor the data, or be forced to by governments.

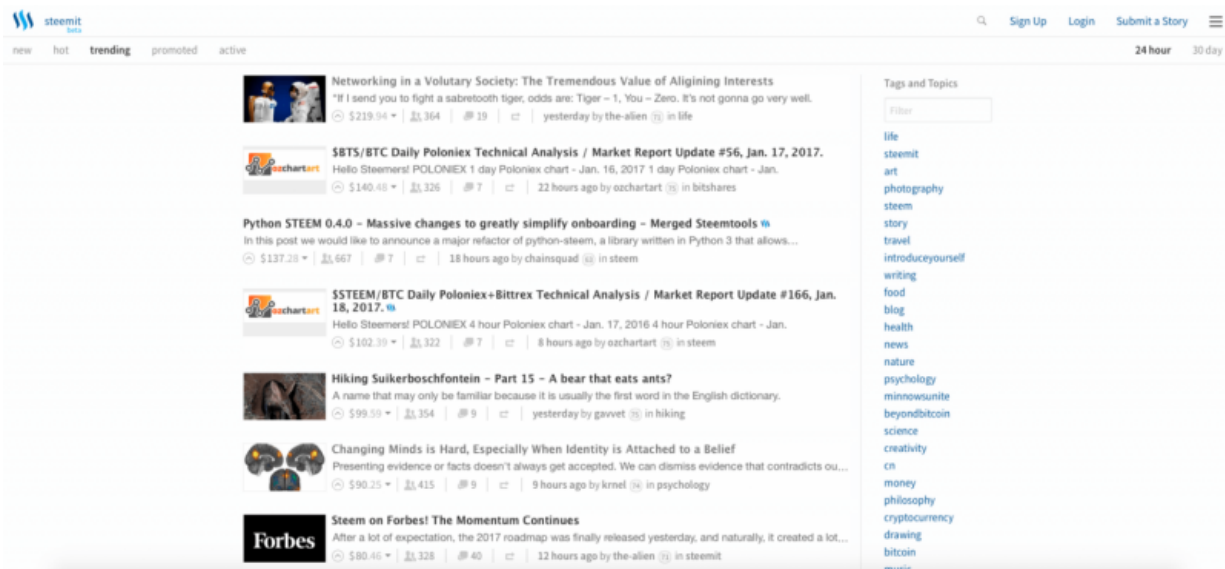
## **How decentralised?**

Most of the other decentralised blockchain social networks are very similar. There is [Synereo](#), which has the added option to post images and hashtag content, and [Akasha](#), which is like a decentralised Twitter, as well as [ThanksCoin](#) and [Yours Network](#).

For all their interesting ideas, however, social networks built on blockchain face some big questions over whether they can really achieve what they promise. To begin with, most are funded by venture capital or individual investors and don't have clear business models for generating sustainable revenue or profits.

There is also the problem that using blockchain as the underlying technology means any content shared becomes a matter of public record. Data and, more importantly, users' history cannot be erased or changed, which means [a slight mistake could haunt people forever](#).





Steemit homepage.

But there is also some doubt over whether these projects really create decentralised social networks at all. They must entail a certain degree of centralisation to develop the code behind them and solve problems such as software bugs or potential hacks. They have been set up by a small group of people that have decided to use technology in a certain way. Some projects might involve users in a more democratic way, but [blockchain does not remove centralisation and politics altogether](#).

What's more, Steemit looks much more like a blogging platform than a social network as we know it, and so far has a very limited range of user-generated content. To become viable alternatives to the likes of Facebook, blockchain networks will have to find a way to attract a much wider population. One strong appeal might be that they provide users with a way to make money from their work rather than allowing someone else to exploit it.

## Unequal power share

Yet there's a limit to the degree to which Blockchain networks are really empowering users. They do not offer alternative economic models, such as collaboration between a community. Instead, they just offer a way to be a part of the "market/attention economy", where individuals receive money for clicks and likes.

And on a political level, while Steemit offers users the chance to gain power, it doesn't distribute it equally. The more popular the content you post or like is, the more power you have. Not only does that lead to inequality, but it also might have distorting and negative effects on the content. For example, it could encourage users to post more dumbed-down, salacious or even fake content in pursuit of the highest readership – something that is already a problem for social networks that don't pay users for clicks.

Blockchain does offer a technological solution for creating alternative organisational models. But it's worth remembering that decentralisation has been behind the internet's architecture since its inception and it has not led to a significant redistribution of power to the general population. That said, [blockchain](#) networks are still in their early stages, and their focus on developing more egalitarian models for [social networking](#) means it is worth watching how they develop.

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