

Twitter's inadequate plan to help young people not get too overwhelmed by bad news

May 31 2017, by Peggy Kern

We live in a [chronically anxious era](#), seemingly being bombarded with negative news at every turn. Social media allow us to not only read about tragedies, but also to interact with those who witnessed terrorist attacks, for instance, which can make the events feel more personal.

When we consider how much time [young people](#) spend on social media, negative [news](#) content may have a bad impact. And those already psychologically vulnerable may be particularly susceptible to the ill effects of a constant stream of negative news. This is because stress responses are [often accentuated](#) in those already suffering from symptoms of anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses.

So, it is encouraging to see some technology companies proactively showing concern about their users' [mental health](#). For example, [Twitter](#) is teaming up with the youth mental health organisation [ReachOut](#) to provide resources to help young people learn about the possible negative impacts of social media, so they won't be overly consumed by it and know how to cope if they are.

This is a good start – Twitter is making more information available. But it can do more, and Twitter shouldn't be the only one doing it.

Technology evolving

Technology and our interactions with it are evolving faster than we can

psychologically adjust. New [technologies often change](#) before they can be thoroughly tested and evaluated scientifically.

Bring in humans and the story gets even [more complicated](#). Social media bring together a rapidly changing technological space, the complexity of human beings and shifting mass communication methods in ways researchers do not yet fully understand.

Many people have a [negativity bias](#), such that they are more likely to focus on bad events and news, rather than on good events and news. The media capitalise on this by sensationalising stories, using hyperbole and reporting on more bad events than good ones.

Exaggerated news reports can lead to [false memories](#) about the event, with people more likely to remember the exaggerated details rather than the real story. And news of traumatic events can increase risks of mental health problems, even for people who do not directly experience the event. For example, two months after the September 11 terrorist bombings in the US, [17% of Americans](#) living outside New York City reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

Social media

Social media have increased the speed at which we hear about events and globalised the spread of information. Events no longer occur at a distance, but right in front of us, unfolding on our mobiles in almost real time.

Social media impact on when we are exposed to information. In the past, we could choose to turn on the news or read the paper at a time that suited us. Now, if we check our social media stream to read the latest gossip or catch up with friends, our news feeds might be filled with negative information, whether or not we want to see it.

Social media also affect what we see. Social media platforms, search engines and other online content are increasingly using [predictive analytics](#) to determine what content is provided to users. Based on your user patterns, the content automatically adjusts to reflect your interests.

The advantage of these approaches is that they help reduce information overload. However, a number of scholars have voiced concerns such algorithms create "[filter bubbles](#)", where a person is increasingly exposed only to information that supports their existing views, and "[echo chambers](#)", where polarised groups perpetuate rumours and create conspiracy theories.

If a [young person](#) in the process of forming their understanding of how the world works sees only negative and exaggerated news stories, this might become their perception of reality. Social media also introduce numerous social cues to a story, such as recommendations from friends who like or dislike the story, and commentaries on events. These can influence [what stories we read](#) and how we feel about them.

But, it's not all bad

We need to be wary of hyperbole in over-claiming the negative effects of social media. After revising 70 studies, my colleagues and I found that social media use correlated with [greater well-being](#) for many people.

Social networks [can expose people](#) to diverse perspectives and ideas that help a young person develop a balanced view of the world.

Twitter's approach of providing resources is a good start. Alternatively, computer algorithms could purposely be set to reduce the quantity of [negative news](#) events that appear on the young person's feed, or to increase the diversity of stories.

Users could also help by purposely recommending articles that highlight positive events occurring around the world. Parents and teachers could use stories that come up to discuss world events, helping the young person think critically about the [story](#).

It's also important to remember that, while Twitter is a popular platform for some users, different platforms appeal to different users. Facebook, Instagram and other platforms should similarly consider how they can best work with mental health organisations to support young people.

Most of the research in this area has occurred with adults. It's important to talk to the young people themselves to really understand their experiences, what stresses and challenges social [media](#) create for them, and to work with them to find ways to use [social media](#) for good.

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