STUCK ON YOU

HOW TO MAKE SOCIAL MEDIA GOOD AGAIN

Sofia Ropek Hewson and
Jasmine Jinadu

April 2026

IPPR
A Decade of
National Renewal

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This paper was first published in April 2026. © IPPR 2026

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Survation for support with polling. Special thanks to Jasmine Jinadu for her research work on this project. Many thanks to Will Davies, Parth Patel, Roa Powell, Emma Norris, Harry Quilter-Pinner, Chris Bick, Nick Garland and Jane Gingrich for comments on the draft.

Thanks to everyone we interviewed for this report, and to our generous and insightful focus group participants.

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Citation
If you are using this document in your own writing, our preferred citation is:
Ropek Hewson S and Jinadu J (2026) *Stuck on you: How to make social media good again*, IPPR.
http://www.ippr.org/publications/stuck-on-you-social-media

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SUMMARY

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECTS US

Social media inarguably poses threats to democracy: disinformation and misinformation, polarisation, echo chambers, bots and rage-inducing algorithms. Excessive social media use and poor moderation can threaten our wellbeing and safety. There's an understandably strong media focus on these severe harms and threats.

But for most people in the UK, social media treads more lightly on our lives. People watch and share videos, help each other in community forums and marketplaces, and keep up with family and friends. It's important to examine how most people use and experience social media, and how newer patterns of use (driven by changes to these platforms over the last 10 years) have more quietly shaped our culture and politics in the UK.

This paper explores these changes: who these platforms show us, who they don't show us, and what the cultural, democratic and political consequences might be. Importantly, we still have choices, and we need to make good ones.

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA HAS CHANGED

Gatekeeping describes how information is filtered to make up what we think of as news or culture.

Social media gatekeeping has changed over the last 20 years, and it has made us less visible to each other – and more isolated.

In the mid-2000s we moved from strong media gatekeeping, which excluded many people, groups and ideas, to weaker gatekeeping, which made it possible for more people to take part in public social life and culture. In 2009, commercial algorithms began to change what we see and muddied the benefits of weaker gatekeeping – it doesn't matter if you *can* post if no-one sees it.

Algorithms have led to a new form of strong gatekeeping: sticky gatekeeping. Stickiness is a marketing term that means keeping people on your platform for as long as possible. Sticky gatekeeping describes how stickiness dictates the content we see. It means we mostly see personalised and influencer-based content on social media platforms, which keeps us entertained, engaged and stuck, but doesn't encourage engagement with other ordinary users, and makes us more isolated from each other.

Our research backs this up. We ran a poll with Survation which asked people to categorise the top four posts in their social media feed and found that:

- 35 per cent of posts were influencers, public figures and recommended content
- 29 per cent were ads and brands
- Only 18 per cent of content was personal, from someone the user knew.

If we're more isolated from each other online, it's harder to see or make common cultures, reject norms or create new political norms.

We need to regulate social media platforms to make them less sticky, but we also need to accept that commercial social media will always be sticky, and come up with non-commercial, public alternatives that could offer us both entertaining and truly social online lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Extend prominence requirements to social media platforms and expand them beyond news**. The government should compel social media companies to not only make public service news prominent on these platforms, but also informational content from groups and organisations that benefit the public but are crowded out by the algorithm. Companies could be required to implement a public service content quota or a separate public benefit feed.
2. **Amend the Online Safety Act to prevent manipulative algorithmic design**. The UK's Online Safety Act (OSA) is focussed on harmful rather than deceptive design, compared with the EU Digital Services Act, which bans manipulative 'dark patterns' that often prioritise commercial relationships over social ones. Amending the OSA could give Ofcom and the government more freedom to target those big tech companies that are making these platforms less social.
3. **Revive Open Door**. The BBC should revive Open Door, a programme commissioned by David Attenborough, which ran from 1973–1983 and allowed interest groups to take control of a timeslot without editorial input. In the context of its charter renewal, reviving Open Door and making its content prominent on BBC social media channels would support the BBC's social and connective mission.
4. **Encourage the BBC and other UK and European public service broadcasters to explore the development of a new public social media platform** with the objective of public social benefit rather than commercial time-on-platform. This platform could integrate news, entertainment and social features rather than acting as a solely civic or informational space.
5. **Make it easier for the BBC and public service broadcasters to compete.** Competition assessments are constraining innovation and aren't fit for purpose in a landscape where large tech companies can operate with little constraint. The government could simplify the Public Interest Test and introduce a public digital infrastructure exemption in competition assessments, allowing public broadcasters to collaborate and challenge the dominance of big tech companies.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1868, Bishop of Oxford Francis Paget wrote that people had made books their drugs, reading anything that amuses them, they 'take no count whatever of the time which they so employ' in this 'literary dram-drinking' while all 'higher studies' and the 'duties of life are left unfulfilled'. Paget found that young people were reading sensational novels 'continually': 'they wallow from day to day amid the filth of the most defiling kind' with their appetites only growing, 'just as the opium-eater requires stronger and stronger doses of the drug that destroys him' (Früwirth 2020).

In a similar tone, *Times* columnist James Marriott wrote in 2025 of the 'dawn of a post-literate society' where university students can't understand Dickens, partly caused by rage-filled social media and addictive algorithms (Cultural Capital, Substack 2025). Marriott gravely warns that 'the rational, dispassionate, print-based liberal democratic order may not survive this revolution'. Marriott's alarm echoes Paget's – the concern that sensational and emotional new media will triumph over rational facts and duty. Dickens himself often satirises this position, as shown by *Hard Times* character Mr Gradgrind: "Teach these boys and girls nothing but facts [...] you can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon facts" (1854).

Paget and Marriott's concerns about democracy and education can be understood in the context of rapid social and technological change. When Francis Paget was writing, public literacy had soared, with the introduction of the mechanised press, popular, serialised literature (like Dickens), and public libraries. The 2020s have seen similarly rapid technological change: more than 70 per cent (5.6 billion) of people across the world now have social media accounts, and people in the UK spend around an hour and a half on social media every day (Data Reportal 2025, Ortiz-Ospina 2019). Online platforms play a huge role in our cultural and social life, and interrogating their impact is important and useful.

But in line with what Amy Orben describes as the 'Sisyphean cycle of technology panics', social media is now described primarily in terms of harm: to the democratic order, to our bodies or to our minds (Orben 2020). Although these harms are real, for most people, social media treads more lightly on our lives. We ran focus groups on social media in December 2025, and our participants saw 'a lot of kindness and a lot of sharing' – especially on more community-oriented platforms. Although some participants talked about some platforms making them think that 'the world is full of awful people' (specifically X), others can 'make you feel a bit better about people': people are 'just saying, "I'm happy, look at this," and that's nice'. Participants agreed that there's 'a lot of goodness' on platforms like Facebook, talking about reaching family who lived far away, joining support groups for parenting children, offering struggling local families help, and learning more about the world.

Social media also weakened media gatekeeping and (at least initially) made it easier for us to challenge narratives and cultures. But over the last 10 years, social media platforms have changed, and the way they work makes us less visible to each other and more isolated, diluting these benefits. Offline, compared to pre-pandemic levels, young people feel lonelier, we have fewer community spaces, and more of us work from home (ONS 2025). At the same

time, our social media platforms have become less social. Compared to 10 years ago, we see more influencers, recommended content, brands and ads in our feed than friends (IPPR/Survation 2026). These changes mean that we've lost public social space, where we see ordinary people we know and don't know. Not only do we see fewer ordinary people online, but because our feeds are personalised, we don't see what anyone else is seeing – meaning it's harder to imagine and build connective public spaces online.

Henry Farrell writes that we think about democracy as a phenomenon dependent on the knowledge and skills of individual citizens, despite its inherently collective nature. Because we think about democracy in this way, we focus on how social media shapes individual behaviour and knowledge (Farrell 2025). In comparison, Farrell believes that the more significant risk to democracy (a collective project) is the distortion of what the *public* thinks is important. In his view, the problem is 'malformed' social media publics, rather than safety or brainwashing. This paper is similarly focussed on the structural, collective implications of social media platforms, and changes to these platforms.

Gatekeeping describes how information is filtered to make up news or culture. This paper will map the current social media landscape and then trace shifts in media gatekeeping: from strong gatekeeping in traditional media to weaker gatekeeping with the advent of early social media. It will then explore the emergence of sticky gatekeeping – how platforms have become stickier, and how this shapes what and who we see. Stickiness is a marketing term that measures user engagement, and social media now must be optimally sticky to retain users in a crowded online world. The paper ends with policy recommendations which respond to the new, sticky social media landscape.

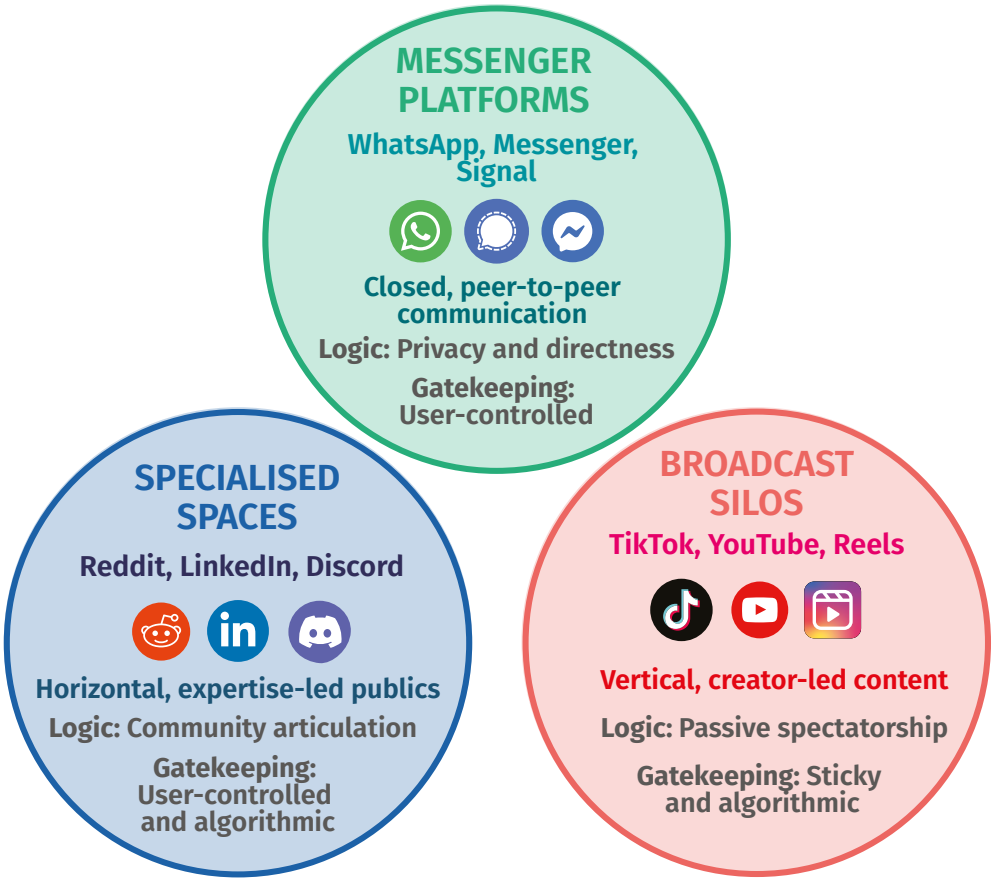
2. MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE

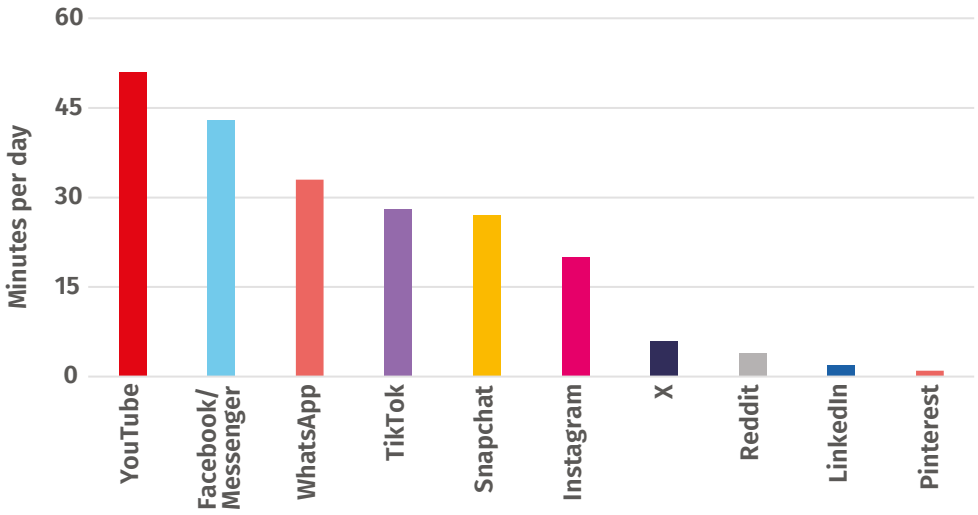
In comparison with earlier public user-to-user iterations of social media, platforms are now mostly divided into three types: closed messenger platforms (WhatsApp, Messenger and messenger functions on TikTok and Instagram), creator-led broadcast platforms (TikTok, YouTube) and specialised spaces like Reddit, LinkedIn and Discord – communities formed for a specific purpose.

On TikTok, YouTube and Instagram, audiences watch professionalised content and mostly react and respond to creators, rather than talk user-to-user. Personalised, influencer-based content makes up what we see on broadcast platforms, while most people share information and talk to each other in private messenger spaces. These patterns of use reflect a longer-term shift in who we see online and who or what curates that content.

FIGURE 2.1: THE NEW SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

How much time users spend on different social media platforms





Source: Ofcom (2025)

This paper is focussed on broadcast platforms rather than closed messaging platforms or specialised spaces, because broadcast platforms command more of our time. According to Ofcom's 2024/25 *Online Nation* report, audiences spend more time on broadcast platforms than other kinds (Ofcom 2025). Through the lens of gatekeeping, this paper examines how broadcast platforms hold a user's attention and loyalty.

3. HOW GATEKEEPING HAS CHANGED

STRONG GATEKEEPING

Gatekeeping describes how information is filtered to make up what we think of as news or culture.

Over the last 20 years, we have moved from a strong gatekeeping system, where single editors chose content disseminated to thousands or millions, to a more dispersed and weaker gatekeeping system.

The local media landscape of the 2010s demonstrates the tail-end of strong gatekeeping. The seaside town of Torquay has a population of 60,000. Torquay's newspaper, the *Herald Express*, sold 21,000 copies per day in 2010 – meaning almost everyone in Torquay read the same newspaper, because readership is normally estimated to be around two and half times newspaper circulation (Ponsford 2011). Strong gatekeeping is often associated with shared public life, public responsibility, the development of ethical and journalistic norms, and a commitment to factchecking.

However, gatekeeping is also commonly used as a pejorative term: a gate is a barrier. Someone operates the gate and their values matter. In 1950, David Manning White studied a wire-editor at a local midwestern newspaper in the US: White watched Mr Gates decide which stories to publish or reject and found that what's newsworthy is 'highly subjective' and shaped by the editor's preconceptions, experiences and values – if not always knowingly (Manning White 1950).

Media gatekeeping is not neutral, and strong gatekeeping's enforcement of political, cultural and social consensus has often come at the expense of marginalising voices and communities. Strong media gatekeeping in Britain has made it difficult for some groups to promote their work and ideas or challenge the dominant media consensus. These groups have struggled to contribute to our shared culture or have epistemic authority – the authority to define what is commonly believed to be true. Specifically, some political groups, immigrants and LGBTQ+ communities have often been either absent from mainstream news coverage or subject to hostile or sensationalised coverage (YouGov 2022, Leveson 2011, UN 2015).

In response to the dominance of strong gatekeeping, there have always been communities outside the gate – philosopher Nancy Fraser calls them counter-publics (Fraser 1990). These groups are not represented in dominant media or politics but sustain communities and sometimes shift public opinion – like Claudia Jones's *West Indian Gazette*, which supported the Black British community, the second wave women's liberation magazine *Spare Rib*, or the London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard – a telephone helpline which provided callers with information about HIV while the *Sun* fuelled panic about a 'gay plague' (Clews 2013).

Shifts away from traditional media and strong gatekeeping benefit these communities but can diminish shared cultural touchpoints. Compared with selling 21,000 copies a day in 2011, the *Torquay Herald Express* sold around 2,500 copies a week in 2025 (Linford 2025). All local and national newspapers have seen their circulations decline as people move online. And with this decline, who curates and controls the flow of news, culture and information has changed.

WEAKER GATEKEEPING

Between 2005 and 2015, strong gatekeeping gave way to weaker, global and more dispersed gatekeeping, as the internet and social media grew in popularity and power – although strong gatekeepers remain in diminished form. Early social media played a key role in weakening gatekeeping: more people can access news and information, create it and share it.

#BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo and the amplification of citizen voices in Gaza through social media demonstrate how weaker gatekeeping can lead to more pluralistic public discourse. While some online causes did struggle to translate early viral success into enduring campaigning and policymaking, they may have shifted public opinion.

However, weaker gatekeeping publics, in comparison with strong gatekeeping publics, do not enforce a strong political, social or cultural consensus. Weaker gatekeeping allows more people to decide what is true and untrue, to debate each other, to create their own images, videos, narratives, groups and platforms, and to frame their view of the world. This is clearly a 'long-overdue remedy to structural epistemic injustice' (Farrell & Schwartzberg 2021).

But there are risks and differences: a weaker social or political consensus can make it harder to check facts, and to understand where our information is coming from. Journalistic ethics don't underpin social media platforms. Rather, these platforms have developed ways of mitigating the risks of weak gatekeeping through factcheckers, bots and content moderators, both human and AI.

Despite these mitigations, we are now more responsible for curating what we read and watch, and for understanding its provenance and politics. More people can contribute to a shared common culture, have epistemic authority, and challenge dominant media narratives. But there are now so many media sources with different rules, aims and politics. We are required to develop new shortcuts and habits to help us distinguish which videos and posts to trust – and our familiarity with the new media environment will determine how easy that is. As we do offline and off-platform, we follow trusted news sites, celebrities and well-informed friends, to curate feeds that feel right.

In 2016, Gillian Tett wrote that our trust in politics had fallen, but our trust in peer groups was high, demonstrating a move from vertical axes of trust (politics, traditional media) to horizontal axes – we trust people like us (Tett 2016). Early social media was a more horizontal axis than traditional media. These platforms were not utopian spaces: the shortcuts we used (and their inherent biases and prejudices) reproduced and intensified the partisan dynamics of traditional media. But they did allow people to spend time in user-led media spaces, to form new communities to counter a lack of online representation, and to develop new common cultures.

However, this more horizontal and user-led iteration of social media was short-lived. In 2009, algorithmic recommendation systems were introduced, reshaping who and what we see, and sharpening social media's commercial model. Early social media platforms were less successfully monetised than 2026 platforms

(mostly because they were still building their user bases), but recommendation systems quickly came to underpin a platform's contemporary business model.

STICKY GATEKEEPING

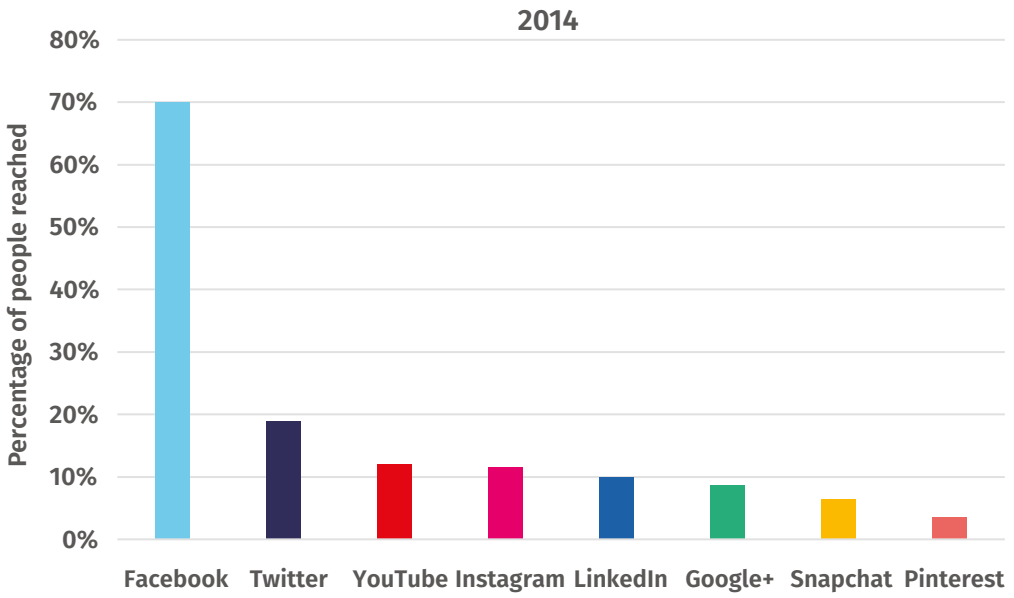
As the number of social media platforms has proliferated and they've developed clearer ways to monetise users, these apps have become increasingly 'sticky'. Originally a 1990s marketing term, stickiness means keeping users on your app for as long as possible – per session and over time. Initially, this stickiness was solely practical: social media platforms are hard to leave because they function as a digital archive for photos and memories, our accounts are difficult to delete, and we can't export our data and relationships (Doctorow 2024).

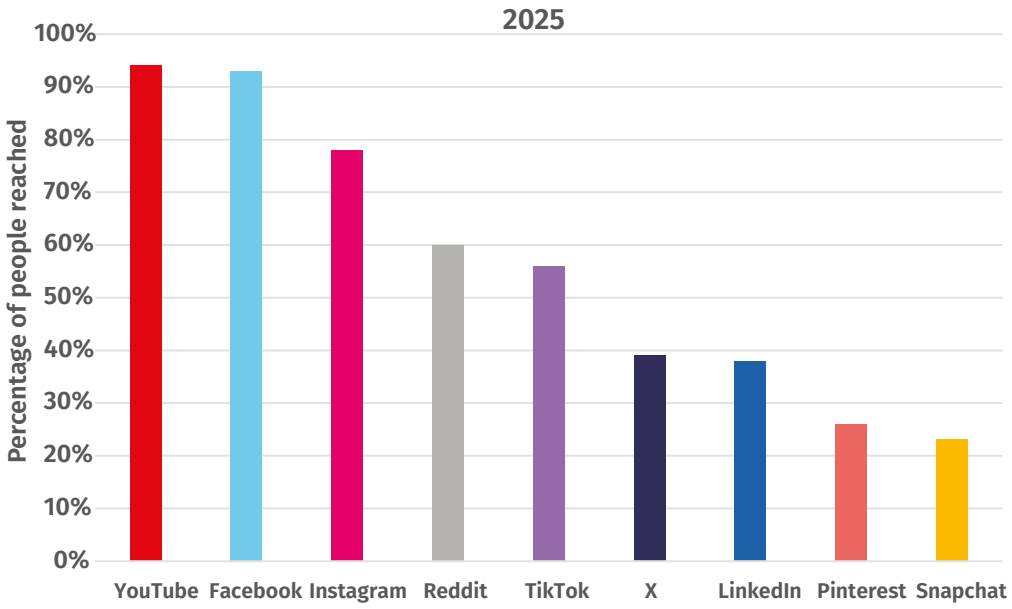
But in 2026, stickiness is also a cross-platform cultural logic that dictates the content we see online: sticky gatekeeping. Social media companies stick users to platforms through an engineered sense of intimacy and belonging, developed through content personalisation and the cultivation of relationships with influencers and content creators – who create optimally sticky content. Through prioritising time-on-platform, commercial algorithms shape who we see and don't see. This leads to new social norms and a distorted perception of the public.

Stickiness isn't the same as addiction. A 2025 *Nature* study found that Instagram users overestimate their addiction, and that users describing themselves as addicted find it harder to control their social media use – and are more likely to blame themselves than the platforms they use. The study found that US news and media more commonly describe social media in terms of addiction than habit, which influences how we describe our use and how much control we feel we have. Compared with addiction, stickiness describes the habitual, intimate, uncomfortable relationship we have with social media, but also our potential to unstick ourselves.

FIGURE 3.2: HOW MANY PEOPLE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS REACH IN THE UK

How many users social media platforms reach: A comparison of 2014 and 2025





Source: Ofcom (2015; 2025)

The shift to sticky gatekeeping was precipitated by more competition. Compared with 2015, many more social media platforms are now competing for users, in contrast to the early dominance of Facebook (Ofcom 2015 and 2025). In response, these sites are becoming increasingly specialised, personalised and sticky in a more relational, intimate way. Social media platforms no longer rely on the practical difficulty of deleting your account. Rather, they use sophisticated tracking and data to create satisfying, sticky cocoons that users don't want to leave – a form of strong gatekeeping for the platform age.

The following sections explore how personalisation and parasocial relationships drive sticky gatekeeping, and what problems have emerged. Specifically: personalisation makes it harder to see shared, culture-forming content, harder to see non-sticky content and groups, and harder to form our own communities. Similarly, the dominance of parasocial relationships on social media makes our experience more passive, less social, and makes ordinary users less visible to each other.

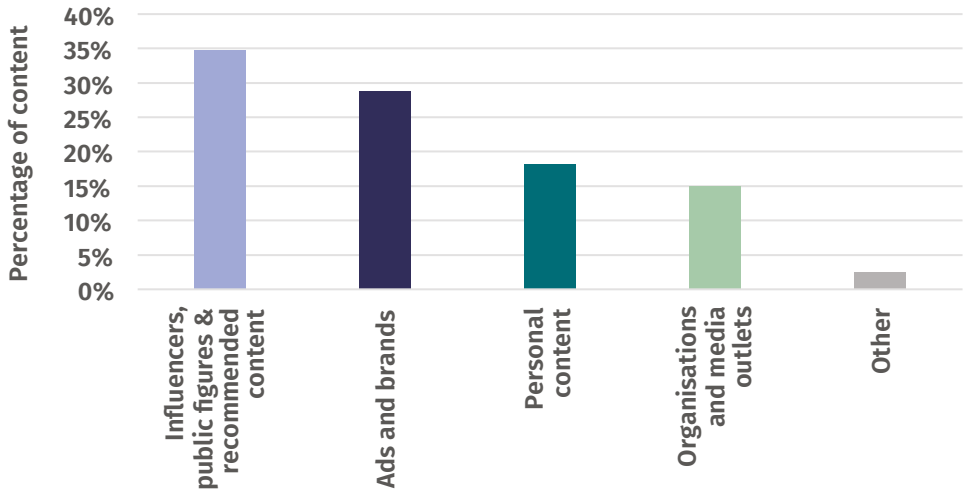
4. PERSONALISATION

Social media companies describe themselves as social and connective, but they're driven by algorithmic personalisation, which shifts us away from shared social experiences. Between 2025 and 2026, we've seen a transition from the 'social graph' (who you know) to the 'interest graph' (what you can be sold). While Meta claims that 'human connection' is at the centre of its mission, its recommendation systems prioritise user-to-platform and user-to-high-value-content connections rather than friend-to-friend interactions (Meta 2026). The 'human connection' is primarily to Meta products, which aim to maximise your time-on-platform.

Pivoting to interest-based content over social content has been a successful commercial strategy because it does keep people on a platform for longer: people aged 18–34 spend 1,470 minutes a month on TikTok versus 510 minutes a month on WhatsApp (Ofcom 2025). Platforms like TikTok have 'tracking pixels' that allow them to follow their users across the internet to harvest data, to make the content they see as personalised and appealing as possible. Mark Zuckerberg acknowledged this new focus in 2025: Meta platforms are no longer truly social but focussed on 'entertainment' and 'discovering what's going on' – more like watching television than taking part in a social space (Chayka 2025). Our polling backs this up this shift.

FIGURE 4.1: WE SEE MORE INFLUENCERS AND ADS THAN FRIENDS IN OUR SOCIAL MEDIA FEEDS

How users categorised the top four posts in their social media feed



Source: IPPR/Survation (2026)

We commissioned a survey that asked 1,000 UK participants to categorise the top four posts of their most used social media feed (excluding YouTube and private messaging platforms, which are not publicly social, and including Instagram, Facebook, X, Bluesky and TikTok). We found that 35 per cent of posts were from influencers, public figures and recommended content, 29 per cent were ads and

brands, and 18 per cent were personally social – content from someone the user knew. Demonstrating content bait and switch, friend-content is more likely to appear in the user's first post (24 per cent) versus the fourth post (14 per cent), and users were almost twice as likely to see an ad in their second feed item as their first.

Are these platforms just giving people what they want? In a recent US trial where Meta was accused of having a social media monopoly the judge, James Boasberg, acknowledged the paucity of friend-related content on Meta platforms and noted that users appeared to want more content from friends. But in his summing up, Boasberg wrote: "Whatever users might say they desire, what seems to draw them to Meta's apps is not marginal posts from marginal friends, but unconnected videos picked just for them... [this is a] profit-maximising corporation giving its customers what they want" (Boasberg 2025).

As Boasberg concludes, personalised, interest-based content sticks users to a platform more than friend-content, and stickiness provides maximal profits for these companies. But perhaps users simply don't have a choice: they don't have access to platforms that prioritise friend-to-friend relationships over user-to-platform profits. We ran two focus groups with 10 participants of different ages and backgrounds across the UK, and asked them to design their ideal social media platform. Participants mostly described non-commercial, social platforms which weren't algorithmic, personalised or 'edited'.

> ***'I think the profit motive in social media... has led to lots of quite harmful things. It's led to the algorithms designed to keep us all on for as long as possible. It leads you down the rabbit holes, and that's when you get these entrenched views. I would... not want influencers involved, people posting for their own monetary gain. I would remove bots.'***
>
> ***'I would create a social media [platform]... for people who want conversation and support. The atmosphere will be more quiet, no profit, no reels, no influencers, no hate crime, and moderators. I think it should be for the benefit of society'.***
>
> ***'Authentic and not edited. Allows you to monitor the content you're exposed to. It would have to be run by someone with the right kind of ethics and value behind them'.***
>
> ***'I would make something similar to Instagram. However, I wouldn't allow influencers on it. It would just be people using it for friends and family, not to gain popularity or to run a business. I think that would be a very good platform'.***
>
> Focus group contributions, 18 December 2025

POLITICAL AND DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS

Personalisation is not a neutral, functional choice. Rather, it is an efficient filtering mechanism rooted in neoliberal market politics: "There's no such thing as society... there are individual men and women" (Margaret Thatcher 1987). Our focus group participants above made clear the need for more non-commercial spaces for conversation and support, where ordinary users are visible to each other. However, social media algorithms optimise for profit and personalisation, diminishing shared, mutually visible space.

Most social media platforms offer billions of individual, personalised content streams, over which we have little curatorial control. We can't easily make our own connections between posts or people, and we don't see anyone

else's content. Much of the shared cultural content we see (popular memes, videos) isn't chosen or stumbled across but emerges from advertising-oriented communities developed by the platforms we use. Platforms group users with similar tastes, behaviours and purchase histories and use those clusters to provide advertisers with targeted communities.

This isolation impacts our ability to use social media to create new cultures and politics. Popular culture and new media have the capacity to allow people to make connections, transgress norms, and shape or demand different politics – cultural theorist Stuart Hall called this 'articulation' (Clarke 2015). In the early 2000s, hope in the democratic, 'articulative' potential of social media and the internet was tangible (Reeher 2002, Weinberger 2002). But developing new, common cultures is harder on 'personal media', as social scientist Zizi Papacharissi describes social media (2002). These platforms elevate passive, commercial consumption over participation, deprioritise groups and content that aren't sticky, and make community building harder – while shaping our culture and politics. They have commercialisation and personalisation as their structural and cultural norms, which inevitably makes connective and transgressive politics harder.

TikTok shopping epitomises the elision of the social and commercial, and how the most optimal 'social' videos are simply efficient funnels for sales: a 'get ready with me' (GRWM) video might have an integrated option to buy the makeup on show or could be followed with an advert for similar products. Shopping is a growing portion of TikTok's UK business: TikTok Shop had its biggest UK sales day on Black Friday in 2025, with 27 products sold every second. Some 200,000 UK businesses, including Marks & Spencer and Sainsbury's, sell products through TikTok (Marsh 2025). The UK social commerce industry was valued at £9 billion in 2025 (more than either the UK's book publishing or music industries) and is growing quickly (Arnett 2025, PA 2024, Sweney 2024).

Our focus group participants understood social media algorithms, their profit motive, and the ease of social commerce:

> ***'The algorithms are designed to keep us all on for as long as possible… people post for their own monetary gain.'***
>
> ***'Let's make this a rage machine and make more money.' (about X)***
>
> ***'I use social media to look for things, and people's viewpoints, as well as online shopping… I tend to go there for almost everything, and I really like the easy accessibility and the connections it gives you.'***
>
> Focus group contributions, 18 December 2025

5. PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Enhancing their commercial stickiness, platforms have also become more parasocial than social, prioritising vertical, influencer-follower relationships over horizontal friend-to-friend relationships. Parasocial describes the connection that a person feels with someone they don't know – a celebrity, a character in a book or TV series, or an AI chatbot. Parasocial relationships were defined in a 1956 paper, but between 2016 and 2020, more studies on parasocial relationships were published than in the previous 60 years (Schramm 2024).

Parasocial influencer content is sticky and engaging and drives the large social commerce industry. As a result, influencers and recommended content (mostly influencer-based) now make up more of our feed than personal, social posts. Through prioritising influencers and content creators, these spaces distort our perception of who the public is, make it harder to see ordinary users, and replace participation with passive and monetised consumption.

The parasocial nature of these platforms is clear: according to our sample of a social media feed, content creators, public figures and influencers make up around 35 per cent of posts we see, compared with 18 per cent of personal content – posts by people you know (IPPR/Survation 2026). A 2024 study by the Pew Research Center in the US similarly found that most accounts followed by US users were influencers, creators and celebrities (Stocking 2024). The most popular social media platforms are now more oriented around influencers, celebrities and creators, across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, X and Facebook. This change makes scrolling TikTok or Instagram inherently more passive and hierarchical.

The commercial case for this shift is clear: influencers and celebrities are likely to be promoted over friends because scrollers spend more time watching them and often spend money to engage with them. People want to buy things they wear or pay to interact with them – seen in YouTube Super Chats, where people pay money to have their comments highlighted in a livestream. As a result, social media platforms make ordinary users less visible to each other: public social interactions are clustered around vertically responding to professional content creators, as opposed to horizontally – user-to-user.

Meta claims that the reduction in friend-related content and the prioritisation of influencers is 'unlikely' to be algorithmic – rather it's simply 'Inventory decline… we are running out of [friends and family] inventory to show our users' and increasing the number of posts from friends is 'almost impossible' (Boasberg 2025). However, Meta (and other platforms) created the conditions for this change in 2014 by shifting their algorithms to prioritise short-form videos and entertainment over social posts – leading to the friend inventory decline we see now.

One of our younger focus group participants described why her behaviour on social media had changed, neatly capturing the commercial and influencer-oriented nature of social media:

'Social media is such a big career, a lot of people obviously do it as a job. So I feel like subconsciously I don't post as often because now there are people making money from it... what's the point of putting content out there if you're not reaping the benefits of it that you can do in today's day and age'

Focus group contribution, 17 December 2025

POLITICAL AND DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS

In response to the prioritisation of sticky content and influencers, the online public is quieter and less visible than six years ago. This shift away from users posting towards a passive and more hierarchical structure has political and democratic implications. Democracy is a collective endeavour, and these spaces distort who the public is, and what the public thinks is important (Farrell 2025).

In 2020, 40 per cent of Americans said that they liked documenting their life in public; in 2024, that number dropped to 28 per cent (Gartner 2024). In the UK, Ofcom found that fewer adults 'feel freer to be themselves' online than offline in 2025 (25 per cent today, compared with 30 per cent last year), and more people find it easier to share their opinions offline rather than online (Ofcom 2025). Meta has similarly found that people now send more photos by direct message than they post publicly (BBC 2025). 2025 polling shows that nearly a third of all social media users post less than a year ago – especially Gen Z adults (BBC 2025).

Most of our focus group participants never or rarely posted on social media – only one participant posted regularly. This was a change for most participants, related to the dominance of influencers and recommended content, the loss of 'freshness' – of content and novelty, and concerns about privacy, safety or their jobs:

'I used to post a lot more than I do.'

'(My relationship with social media) has developed a lot. I don't post anything. I don't have any posts, and it was a really big change for me, and it's just a massive contrast really.'

'On TikTok, I'm very much a spectator. I have a profile that doesn't have a profile picture, and I just watch things on the For You page. A lot of my friends don't really post either, nor do family... which is strange.'

'I very, very rarely post anything. When I was much younger... I had a whole photo album from one night out... I would never dream of doing that now.'

'I've definitely seen a decline in the amount of times I share stuff online.'

Focus group contributions, 17 December 2025

As a result, a few very visible participants shape the perception of what the public thinks, and what politicians and decision-makers think of the public, across all types of platforms. Currently, platform algorithms produce a collective view of public opinion that prioritises some parts and sidelines others, shaping the 'contours of politics', our sense of what is legitimate and how we might need to politically respond – leading to what Henry Farrell describes as 'malformed publics' (Farrell 2025).

The political impact for progressives has become clear: a February 2026 paper on X by German Gauthier and Roland Hodler found that its algorithms promote conservative influencers and deprioritise posts by traditional media. The paper notes that algorithmic content guides users to follow conservative political activist accounts, which they continue to follow after users are switched to a chronological feed – meaning that the algorithm likely has a persistent effect on users' political

attitudes. X is heavily used by politicians and journalists in the UK, which could warp the issues they believe are salient (Reuters 2023).

Other platforms appear to have similar politics: following X, Facebook removed third-party factchecking to 'dramatically reduce the amount of censorship' on Meta platforms, with Zuckerberg acknowledging: 'We're going to catch less bad stuff' (YouTube, 2025). Facebook has also reportedly removed LGBTQ+ community groups since Donald Trump was re-elected (ABC, 2025). A comparable study to Gauthier and Hodler's work on X, focussing on the politics and people promoted by Meta, would be useful. Different platforms clearly prioritise different communities and politics based on the objectives of their owners – importantly, these design choices are not neutral and they shape public opinion.

Because social media companies prioritise some politics and people over others, and personalised experience over shared experience, these platforms are entertaining, sticky and easy to use, but not social or connective. Rather than accepting the dominance of algorithms that prioritise time-on-site, we must acknowledge that social media has become a public utility – on the basis of its cultural and political influence and monopoly power. We need public algorithms with different objectives, and platforms that support more common cultures – although not with the false ideal of a single common culture or public sphere.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations respond to the ways that social media companies stick us to their platforms. They are aimed at unsticking us and diluting their gatekeeping effects. These platforms offer us an entertaining (if not social or connective) product, but we don't have to accept their dominance.

Political theorist Antoine Sander writes that theorists have 'sunk into a form of pessimism', 'threatening to throw away the democratic potential of the new media environment', despite the fact that it weakens gatekeepers and allows ordinary people to talk to each other at scale (Sander 2025). Sander says we can recover the democratic and emancipatory potential of social media. Similarly, sociologist Paulo Gerbaudo writes that the way the online public sphere currently operates shouldn't lead us to overlook its democratic potential (2022).

We can fund better, more social and more open alternatives, and we can require existing companies to acknowledge their role in our culture, politics and media. The medium is the message, and we can offer people different messages and reshape online public life. These recommendations don't call for purely civic, rational platforms oriented around polite political debate – they acknowledge the role of entertainment and popular culture in public life and politics.

There's a strong contemporary media focus on the threat that social media poses to democracy, in the form of addiction, disinformation, harm, abuse, harassment, echo chambers or bots. But we need to reserve some space to consider the unrealised democratic potential of a shared online social life, and to think about what new, widely used platforms could look like and offer people.

MAKE THE ALGORITHM WORK FOR US

Stronger, value-based regulation could reshape the social media landscape in the UK, as the Digital Services Act has effected change in the EU and beyond.

Extend prominence requirements to social media platforms

This recommendation aims to re-platform groups deprioritised by commercial algorithms. In its July 2025 report on the future of public service media, Ofcom recommended the government explore extending prominence rules for news on social media and other platforms. The government could go further and put strong prominence rules in place that compel social media companies to provide space not only for public news, but for informational content from a wide range of groups. This could include councils, and local and national groups that provide benefit to the public, including registered charities, community interest companies and statutory bodies.

These groups are currently forced to rent space on these platforms because their content doesn't align with the algorithm's time-on-platform objective. This change would make these platforms less sticky and re-platform groups that are under-prioritised by commercial algorithms – acknowledging that as these platforms become more dominant and akin to broadcast companies, they have commensurate responsibilities.

Germany introduced prominence regulations in 2020 that require social media platforms to ensure that they don't 'unfairly disadvantage (directly or indirectly) or treat differently' journalistic content providers (Interstate Media Treaty 2020). The UK's 2024 Media Act gave public service broadcasters prominence on connected TVs and similar devices. The government could explore amending the Media Act to give public service broadcasters, news and public service content (defined more broadly to include verified groups providing benefit to the public) prominence on social media platforms – either through requiring platforms to provide a public benefit feed option or through specifying a quota for public benefit content.

Ban manipulative design

This recommendation targets how algorithms quietly shape our social and democratic culture. The UK's Online Safety Act is focussed on harmful design but not deceptive design. In comparison, article 25 of the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) explicitly bans 'dark patterns', meaning online platforms can't design or run their services in a way that 'materially distorts or impairs the ability of the recipients of their service to make free and informed decisions'. The DSA also requires large platforms to consider systemic risk in relation to the design and use of their platforms, and to permit researchers to access data to research systemic risk – provisions not in the Online Safety Act.

The European Commission is wielding its broader powers: in December 2025, it fined X €120 million because the platform's blue ticks 'deceive users' as X does not 'meaningfully' verify the account users. In February 2026, it found that TikTok's features – including its infinite scroll, autoplay, and its personalisation recommendation system breached the DSA, because its risk assessments had not addressed how its dark patterns and design could be harmful or addictive. The DSA's attention to systemic risk and dark patterns permits the European Commission to take a broader approach to platform design than the UK.

The UK's 2024 Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill prohibits similar patterns, 'nudges and sludges' – harmful design choices that either lead consumers to make choices too quickly (nudges), or to find it prohibitively difficult to do something they want (sludges). But these bans are in the context of consumer decision-making rather than broader democratic protection.

The government could amend the Online Safety Act to require tech companies to assess their platform design for possible systemic risk, and to ban dark patterns – in particular manipulative design that impairs the ability of users to make free and informed decisions, in line with the DSA. These amendments would strengthen the act and equip the UK to tackle big tech platforms and social media algorithms more comprehensively.

TAKE SOCIAL INCLUSION SERIOUSLY

Social media platforms shape who's included in our politics and culture, and this recommendation demonstrates how public service broadcasters can mitigate the impacts of commercial algorithmic gatekeeping.

Revive Open Door

To acknowledge the strong editorialisation and gatekeeping operated by platforms, the BBC should revive Open Door, the programme commissioned by David Attenborough that ran from 1973–1983. This series allowed interest groups to take control of transmission for a short timeslot without editorial input. In the context of its charter renewal, reviving Open Door and making its content prominent on BBC social media channels would support the BBC's mission as a social and connective organisation in an age of fragmentation.

Open Door was an experiment in participatory democracy aimed at addressing strong gatekeeping. Attenborough wanted to bring 'unheard voices to a mainstream audience' and challenge the ways the BBC made content – bringing 'new editorial attitudes that do not derive from the assumptions of the university-educated elite who are commonly believed to dominate television production' (Attenborough 1972).

The BBC currently runs Your Voice, Your BBC News, where it asks viewers what stories they should be reporting on, from underreported local issues to the framing of big national issues. Reviving Open Door would take participatory reporting a step further, showcasing groups that don't get mainstream news coverage, and allowing them to editorialise their own coverage. Open Door platformed poetry groups, graduate students, the Old Age Pensioners' Joint Committee, Black workers' rights groups, and the Wages for Housework Campaign – among many others – over its 10 years of coverage.

MAKE NEW PLATFORMS AND MAKE IT EASIER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTERS TO COMPETE

The BBC's 2024/25 annual report notes that more of us now consume algorithmic content that might not have 'the interests of a shared British culture and our democracy at heart' (BBC 2024/25). In comparison, the BBC is driven to promote a shared British culture and British democracy. Public service broadcasting values, and their commitment to diversity, matter in a commercial social media landscape.

Develop a public social media platform

The government should recommend the BBC and other British and European public service broadcasters form a coalition to explore the feasibility of a public social media platform. This new platform would have the objective of public benefit, rather than time-on-platform – leading the charge against big technology companies. This platform would not be a solely civic space, and should integrate news, entertainment and social features.

This demand for a better social platform is seen in the migration of users to specialised spaces like LinkedIn, Reddit and Substack, which are enjoying huge growth (Savage 2026). But these companies are commercial and have similar algorithmic objectives to Meta and X. Public broadcasting values could drive the development of a different platform.

There are abundant examples of different, smaller-scale or non-profit platforms: Mastodon is crowdfunded and based on open-source code, and on a more local scale; over half the residents in Vermont are on Front Porch Forum, a platform without an algorithm and with limited advertising. 2024 research found that Front Porch Forum is one of the only online spaces in the US that makes its users feel more informed and connected to people around them, with one user describing it as the 'glue that holds our community together'. The *Washington Post* describes it as a 'kinder, gentler' online community that moves more slowly, with stronger moderation.

The government could recommend a staged approach to developing a public platform: firstly, a coalition could be formed with the BBC and other UK and EU public service broadcasters, followed by a feasibility study, and then the development of funding, regulation and competition policy plans. Any pan-European platform should allow for national and local feeds and spaces.

Make it easier for public service broadcasters to compete with big tech

In 2026, it has become clear that competition policy and public interest tests were designed for an earlier and different media environment. These policies and tests

now risk constraining innovation in a landscape dominated by large technology platforms. Public broadcasters undergo extensive public value and competition assessments when they launch new services, while companies like Alphabet and Meta face fewer constraints when they expand their platforms and services.

In 2008, the BBC, Channel 4 and ITV proposed Project Kangaroo, a joint video streaming service – which could have competed with Netflix (now worth $150 billion, it launched in 2007). After lobbying by commercial rivals including Sky, the Competition Commission rejected the proposal on the basis that it would threaten competition (Sweney 2009).

To level the playing field between big tech companies and public service broadcasters, the new BBC Charter should simplify the Public Value Test, to enable public service broadcasters to develop new online services that will benefit the public. The Charter Green Paper makes valuable progress, including the proposal to reinstate innovation as a BBC public service duty, but it currently frames innovation primarily in commercial terms. Innovation should instead be clearly framed in the new charter as the development of technologies, tools and platforms for public benefit.

The BBC should also be freer to experiment with new technologies and tools without disproportionate competition constraints. Acknowledging the dominance of large technology platforms, the new charter should introduce a public digital infrastructure exemption in competition assessments for collaborations between public broadcasters. As Project Kangaroo demonstrates, without this change, competition policy will continue to prevent the development of public-interest digital infrastructure capable of competing with big tech companies.

Without these changes, we will continue, nationally and globally, to be dependent on commercial digital platforms which do not share our values.

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