



TECH

## Popularity on social media? Not cool

By Katy Steinmetz

FOLLOWER COUNTS ON TWITTER HAVE BECOME A fashionable currency—something that prominently displays a person's clout and even generates income for users with big enough numbers. Yet on Sept. 20, one of those “influencers” sent a tweet criticizing the popularity contest that such metrics create. “[We] should be able to participate in social media without having to show how many followers or likes we have,” wrote uber-celebrity Kanye West. “This has an intense negative impact on our self worth.”

Not only that. As Twitter, along with other social-media platforms, continues to grapple with issues ranging from hate speech to disinformation, academics are warning that “scores” like follower counts and retweet tallies may be contributing to a culture of mindless outrage and even making users more susceptible to manipulation. Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey has himself said the company is evaluating the problematic “incentives” the platform’s design creates.

Humans are social creatures, in constant search of information about whether they belong, says Jay Van Bavel, an associate professor of psychology at New York University. And these features function as tantalizing “signs of status.” It feels bad when a post doesn’t get any likes. And when the counts go up, users get bursts of pleasure. So people are therefore encouraged to do whatever it takes to make those numbers grow. “This is how rats work. Press a lever, get a pellet,” Van Bavel says. “The human brain is structured the same way.”

And what’s the best way to get those ego boosts?

Unfortunately, studies suggest that sensational, polarizing content tends to receive more response. In his research, Van Bavel has found that tweets containing strong moral and emotional language—what he sums up as “moral outrage”—are about 20% more likely to get retweeted. This correlates, he says, with the fact that politicians on the ideological extremes have bigger followings than their moderate peers.

If being nuanced yields crickets, it’s easy to see how users can get into a cycle where they’re constantly trying to find things to be outraged about instead. Worse still, algorithms that promote popular content may spread the types of posts that make people angriest, says Yale psychologist Molly Crockett. In turn, this can inhibit outrage’s social usefulness: to deter people from doing things that others strongly dislike. When everything is worthy of outrage, Crockett says, then effectively nothing is.

This makes people vulnerable to exploitation. If bad actors in Russia or elsewhere know that users will respond to extreme claims, Van Bavel says, they can use that psychology to spread false news. And in the race to get likes, users may share links they’ve never read or even information they know is untrue. MIT cognitive scientist David Rand has found that even people who say it’s very important to share only vetted stuff will spread inaccurate information on platforms like Facebook. The prospect of getting “immediate good social feedback,” Rand says, can be overwhelming.

**SO WHAT CAN SITES** like Twitter do? It’s hard to imagine the elimination of defining features like follower counts and likes totals, indeed because they make users feel good and encourage time spent on the site (all of which helps the company’s bottom line). West’s tweet raised one idea, which could have an impact on how and what people share: make the display of those numbers optional.

The company is in the midst of figuring out how to measure the “health” of conversation on the platform, and that may also yield fresh ideas. Experts suggest there may be ways to gamify the system so that users are incentivized to do things like produce “Eureka!” moments or to spread fact checks. Twitter is already experimenting with ideas like promoting alternative viewpoints and labeling bots, for a start.

Figuring out how to quantify the quality of discussion on social media—and then make it better—is a monumental task. But in a recent appearance on Capitol Hill, Dorsey suggested that it is also an existential one. And he expressed a willingness to do whatever it takes to improve that metric once the company has it. “Otherwise,” he said of Twitter, “no one is going to use it in the first place.” □

WELL: NICK OXFORD—REUTERS; TWITTER: ILLUSTRATION BY MARTIN GEE FOR TIME

