INFINITE SCROLL

WHY THE INTERNET ISN'T FUN ANYMORE

The social-media Web as we knew it, a place where we consumed the posts of our fellow-humans and posted in return, appears to be over.

By Kyle Chayka

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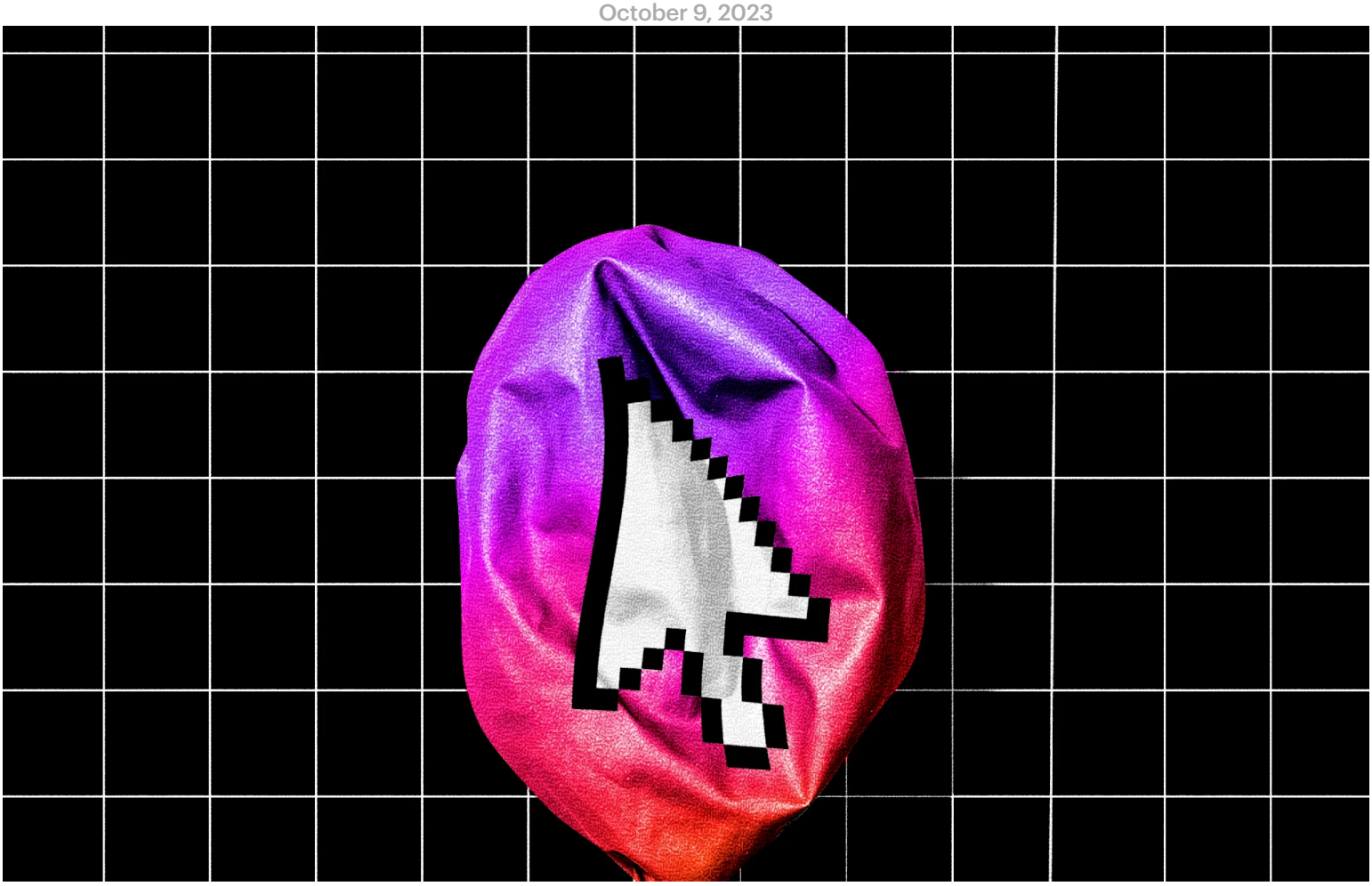

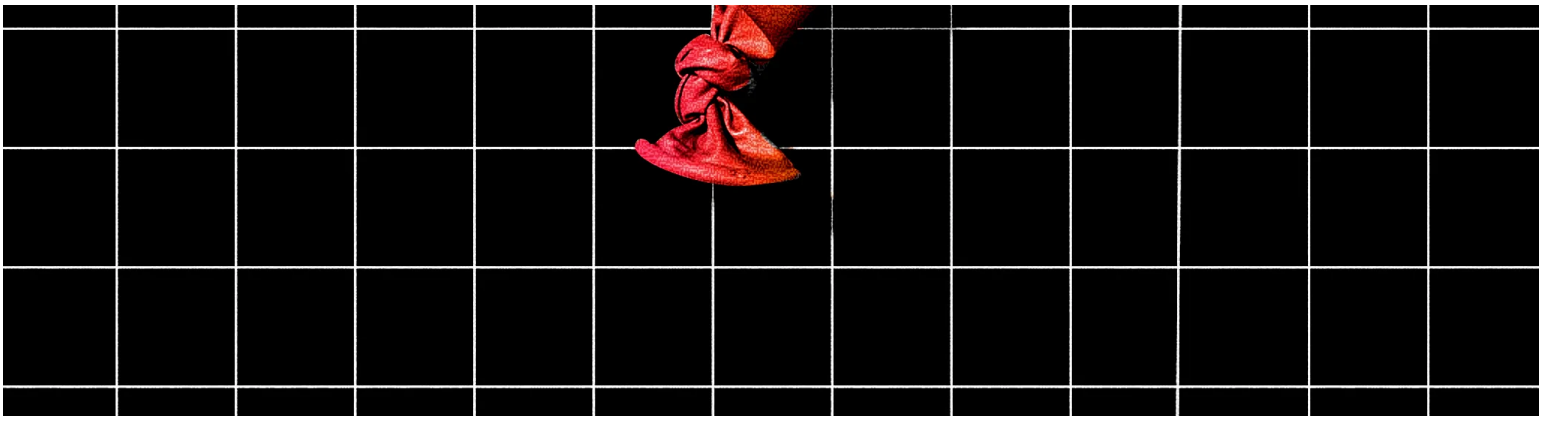

Illustration by Nicholas Konrad / The New Yorker; Source photograph by Getty

Lately on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, my timeline is filled with vapid posts orbiting the same few topics like water whirlpooling down a drain. Last week, for instance, the chatter was dominated by talk of Taylor Swift's romance with the football player Travis Kelce. If you tried to talk about anything else, the platform's algorithmic feed seemed to sweep you into irrelevance. Users who pay for Elon Musk's blue-check verification system now dominate the platform, often with far-right-wing commentary and outright disinformation; Musk rewards these users monetarily based on the engagement that their posts drive, regardless of their veracity. The decay of the system is apparent in the spread of fake news and mislabelled videos related to Hamas's attack on Israel.

Elsewhere online, things are similarly bleak. Instagram's feed pushes months-old posts and product ads instead of photos from friends. Google search is cluttered with junky results, and S.E.O. hackers have ruined the trick of adding "Reddit" to searches to find human-generated answers. Meanwhile, Facebook's parent company, Meta, in its latest bid for relevance, is reportedly developing artificial-intelligence chatbots with various "sassy" personalities that will be added to its apps, including a role-playing D. & D. Dungeon Master based on Snoop Dogg. The prospect of interacting with such a character sounds about as appealing as texting with one of those spam bots that asks you if they have the right number.

The social-media Web as we knew it, a place where we consumed the posts of our fellow-humans and posted in return, appears to be over. The precipitous decline of X is the bellwether for a new era of the Internet that simply feels less fun than it used to be. Remember having fun online? It meant stumbling onto a Web site you'd never imagined existed, receiving a meme you hadn't already seen regurgitated a dozen times, and maybe even playing a little video game in your browser. These experiences don't seem as readily

available now as they were a decade ago. In large part, this is because a handful of giant social networks have taken over the open space of the Internet, centralizing and homogenizing our experiences through their own opaque and shifting content-sorting systems. When those platforms decay, as Twitter has under Elon Musk, there is no other comparable platform in the ecosystem to replace them. A few alternative sites, including Bluesky and Discord, have sought to absorb disaffected Twitter users. But like sproutlings on the rain-forest floor, blocked by the canopy, online spaces that offer fresh experiences lack much room to grow.

One Twitter friend told me, of the platform's current condition, "I've actually experienced quite a lot of grief over it." It may seem strange to feel such wistfulness about a site that users habitually referred to as a "hellsite." But I've heard the same from many others who once considered Twitter, for all its shortcomings, a vital social landscape. Some of them still tweet regularly, but their messages are less likely to surface in my Swift-heavy feed. Musk recently tweeted that the company's algorithm "tries to optimize time spent on X" by, say, boosting reply chains and downplaying links that might send people away from the platform. The new paradigm benefits tech-industry "thread guys," prompt posts in the "what's your favorite Marvel movie" vein, and single-topic commentators like Derek Guy, who tweets endlessly about menswear. Algorithmic recommendations make already popular accounts and subjects even more so, shutting out the smaller, more magpie-ish voices that made the old version of Twitter such a lively destination. (Guy, meanwhile, has received so much

algorithmic promotion under Musk that he accumulated more than half a million followers.)

The Internet today feels emptier, like an echoing hallway, even as it is filled with more content than ever. It also feels less casually informative. Twitter in its heyday was a source of real-time information, the first place to catch wind of developments that only later were reported in the press. Blog posts and TV news channels aggregated tweets to demonstrate prevailing cultural trends or debates. Today, they do the same with TikTok posts—see the many local-news reports of dangerous and possibly fake "TikTok trends"—but the TikTok feed actively dampens news and political content, in part because its parent company is beholden to the Chinese government's censorship policies. Instead, the app pushes us to scroll through another dozen videos of cooking demonstrations or funny animals. In the guise of fostering social community and user-generated creativity, it impedes direct interaction and discovery.

According to Eleanor Stern, a TikTok video essayist with nearly a hundred thousand followers, part of the problem is that social media is more hierarchical than it used to be. "There's this divide that wasn't there before, between audiences and creators," Stern said. The platforms that have the most traction with young users today—YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch—function like broadcast stations, with one creator posting a video for her millions of followers; what the followers have to say to one another doesn't matter the way it did on the old Facebook or Twitter. Social media "used to be more of a place for conversation and reciprocity," Stern said. Now conversation isn't

strictly necessary, only watching and listening.

Posting on social media might be a less casual act these days, as well, because we've seen the ramifications of blurring the border between physical and digital lives. Instagram ushered in the age of self-commodification online—it was the platform of the selfie—but TikTok and Twitch have turbocharged it. Selfies are no longer enough; video-based platforms showcase your body, your speech and mannerisms, and the room you're in, perhaps even in real time. Everyone is forced to perform the role of an influencer. The barrier to entry is higher and the pressure to conform stronger. It's no surprise, in this environment, that fewer people take the risk of posting and more settle into roles as passive consumers.

The patterns of life offscreen affect the makeup of the digital world, too. Having fun online was something that we used to do while idling in office jobs: stuck in front of computers all day, we had to find something on our screens to fill the down time. An earlier generation of blogs such as the Awl and Gawker seemed designed for aimless Internet surfing, delivering intermittent gossip, amusing videos, and personal essays curated by editors with quirky and individuated tastes. (When the Awl closed, in 2017, Jia Tolentino lamented the demise of "online freedom and fun.") Now, in the aftermath of the pandemic, amid ongoing work-from-home policies, office workers are less tethered to their computers, and perhaps thus less inclined to chase likes on social media. They can walk away from their desks and take care of their children, walk their dog, or put their laundry in. This might have a salutary effect on individuals, but it means that fewer

Internet-obsessed people are furiously creating posts for the rest of us to consume. The user growth rate of social platforms over all has slowed over the past several years; according to one estimate, it is down to 2.4 per cent in 2023.

That earlier generation of blogs once performed the task of aggregating news and stories from across the Internet. For a while, it seemed as though social-media feeds could fulfill that same function. Now it's clear that the tech companies have little interest in directing users to material outside of their feeds. According to Axios, the top news and media sites have seen "organic referrals" from social media drop by more than half over the past three years. As of last week, X no longer displays the headlines for articles that users link to. The decline in referral traffic disrupts media business models, further degrading the quality of original content online. The proliferation of cheap, instant A.I.-generated content promises to make the problem worse.

Choire Sicha, the co-founder of the Awl and now an editor at *New York*, told me that he traces the seeds of social media's degradation back a decade. "If I had a time machine I'd go back and assassinate 2014," he said. That was the year of viral phenomena such as Gamergate, when a digital mob of disaffected video-game fans targeted journalists and game developers on social media; Ellen DeGeneres's selfie with a gaggle of celebrities at the Oscars, which got retweeted millions of times; and the brief, wondrous fame of Alex, a random teen retail worker from Texas who won attention for his boy-next-door appearance. In those events, we can see some of the nascent forces that would solidify in subsequent years: the tyranny of the

loudest voices; the entrenchment of traditional fame on new platforms; the looming emptiness of the content that gets most furiously shared and promoted. But at that point they still seemed like exceptions rather than the rule.

I have been trying to recall the times I've had fun online unencumbered by anonymous trolling, automated recommendations, or runaway monetization schemes. It was a long time ago, before social networks became the dominant highways of the Internet. What comes to mind is a Web site called Orisinal that hosted games made with Flash, the late interactive animation software that formed a significant part of the kitschy Internet of the two-thousands, before everyone began posting into the same platform content holes. The games on the site were cartoonish, cute, and pastel-colored, involving activities like controlling a rabbit jumping on stars into the sky or helping mice make a cup of tea. Orisinal was there for anyone to stumble upon, without the distraction of follower counts or sponsored content. You could e-mail the site to a friend, but otherwise there was nothing to share. That old version of the Internet is still there, but it's been eclipsed by the modes of engagement that the social networks have incentivized. Through Reddit, I recently dug up an emulator of all the Orisinal games and quickly got absorbed into one involving assisting deer leaping across a woodland gap. My only reward was a personal high score. But it was more satisfying, and less lonely, than the experience these days on X. ♦

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