

# Social Media

© Chan Si Cheng, Patricia



The rise of social media has taken the world by storm. It is estimated that Facebook is now the third largest “country” in the world, coming after only China and India in terms of population. Online platforms have offered us ways to get connected like never before. However, while we are enjoying the many benefits they bring, we shall not forget the cost of over-reliance on social media.

Let’s take Facebook as an example. Facebook shows us advertisements based on the information we post on our Timeline and the actions we take on or off Facebook. That means if we do not manually change our setting, we may not be shown advertisements that Facebook decides we will not be interested in. The problem is, however, when we let the social platform filter out topics that it deems irrelevant to us, we are giving away our decision-making power to a computer and limiting our horizons to only what we want to see, or what Facebook thinks we want to see.

Facebook’s decision to show us different advertisements may be motivated by its assessment of our needs, but the assessment may not always be reliable. Do you know that images published on Facebook through Instagram receive as much as 23% more engagement than other image posts? This is the result of a study of more than 1 billion Facebook posts, and it should not come as a

surprise in view of the fact that Instagram is owned by Facebook.

Do you also know that Facebook collects information about its users’ political leaning? In this year’s U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump’s campaign has specifically paid for its advertisements to be shown to people categorized by Facebook as “politically moderate”. The fact that we are increasingly exposed to content not of our own choosing on social media means we are all unknowingly swayed one way or another.

As social media is becoming an increasingly important source of information, we may no longer be active researchers and consumers of information. We are fed what the computer wants to show us and thinks we will like. In this process, we are inadvertently closing ourselves to alternative ideas or viewpoints that could give us a more complete picture of the world. That is a risk we are all taking as we are becoming ever more reliant on social media.

Social media is great, but to really enjoy its benefits, we need to be able to decide for ourselves whether the information we receive is well-balanced. Comparing information from different sources and angles is a good start, and it is always a good habit to remain sceptical until we have located the evidence ourselves.