# Alternatives to Facebook: Taking the 'Big' Out of 'Big Tech' | Opinion

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Social media platforms appear to have entered a permanent state of crisis. In what has become a series of legal woes, Meta's Facebook has agreed to pay $90 million to settle a privacy lawsuit over user tracking. This comes in the wake of Frances Haugen—a former Facebook employee—shedding light on the platform's inability to prevent the spread of harmful content at the global level in documents released last fall.

So far, the public's response to this state of crisis has been twofold. While some ask social media platforms to invest more resources and energy into detecting misinformation and hate speech, others have called for a tighter regulation of the tech industry. We are professors at San José State University who teach the ethics of technology and we think that this won't work. In fact, we have a better and more radical solution in mind: It's time to say goodbye to mainstream social media platforms and replace them with alternatively designed ones.

For Big Tech, money talks louder than moral conscience. Mainstream social media companies have little incentive to transform their platforms into ones that would better protect their users if they fear that this will diminish profit. What is more, the spread of harmful content on Twitter and Facebook is not caused by negligence or lack of good will, but by the very infrastructure of these platforms.

What would it look and feel like to engage with friends and family online without the influence of algorithms designed to manipulate us?

One need only look to past versions of Facebook, which prior to the implementation of the aforementioned algorithms simply served content from newest to oldest, to see what this might look like. As mentioned above, the prospect of more money led Facebook away from this model and toward its current engagement-based system.

We need to shift our expectations of what social media is and can be in order to create new ways and spaces to engage online in more healthy ways. We can start by thinking smaller (social media platforms need not be as big as they are) and replace the Silicon Valley adage of "Move Fast and Break Things" with an ethic of care and consent. Luckily, there are people already doing this work:

- Organizations like The Design Justice Network are committed to centering the voices and experiences of those marginalized by design into design processes through the

creation of a set of design justice principles and through community building and resource sharing.
- Artists like Ben Grosser, who created a new social media platform called Minus, only allows users 100 posts for life, radically challenging our impulse to share and forcing us to rethink what is worth sharing.
- Or community driven projects, like Tilde.Club, that challenge the nature of what it means to make and spend time online, where a group of over a thousand people from around the world share and connect remotely to a single computer to make and host their own webpages.

What these projects and others like them show us is that another internet is possible and is already here. One that isn't invested in profit but instead connection. To make such an internet possible, we will need to spend a little more time thinking about how we spend time online, be willing to move a little more slowly or take a few extra steps when engaging with others and invest in smaller creators and companies.

Such projects cannot replace platforms like Facebook and Instagram at scale, but simply replacing these companies is not the point. The point is that we need to radically rethink how and why we engage online and build new infrastructures that prioritize communities over profit. Perhaps Big Tech should give way to Little Tech.

We now know that Facebook's engagement-based ranking system amplifies divisive content on its platform. Aggressive posts generate likes, comments and shares, which make them appear on a wide range of users' feeds. As Mike Isaac—a reporter at *The New York Times*—recently explained, the problem does not lie with a lack of corporate leadership from the Valley's visionaries, but with the very features "that have made Facebook be Facebook."

It's time to face the facts: Social media as we know it is beyond salvation. Fortunately, we have the power to imagine and create a better life online using alternative algorithms.

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