Social Media and the Information Landscape: Intermediate

Directions: *Read the following article and then discuss the connection questions that follow.*

The arrival of social media has impacted how people consume, share and create information. It has given everyone around the world with access to the Internet a platform to share their views, a place to engage with countless pieces of information, access to personalised content and spaces to debate with those who hold different views.

In the past, people used to get information from people they knew and/or a limited number of sources: printed materials, such as books, newspapers and magazines, the radio and television. These sources tended to be controlled by certain organisations. This meant a small group shaped the information people consumed and made it difficult for those without access to those organisations to challenge the stories that were told. However, it also meant that everyone had access to similar information, which made it easier to construct a shared sense of reality.

> **Glossary**
> - **Misinformation (noun):** False or inaccurate information.
> - **Amateur (adjective):** Non-professional.
> - **Biased (adjective):** Supporting or opposing a particular person or thing in an unfair way.
> - **Algorithm (noun):** A set of rules and calculations made by computers that decides what content users see on social media.
> - **Polarisation (noun):** A situation in which people or opinions are divided into opposing groups.

The absence of the Internet and globalised communication systems also meant that people were more closely connected to those they came across who held different views – they were part of the same local or national community – so while there were differences, people could also see similarities. This meant there was more of a social glue and disagreements tended to be managed more politely.

The Internet and social media have changed this. Now, anyone can create content for others and there are countless online information platforms. This has allowed anyone to express their views to people everywhere and has meant that people can seek out information that aligns with their interests. In this new information space, what people think has become an important part of their identity, of how they see themselves and how others see them.

These changes have also allowed **misinformation** to spread in new ways. While some of the information available on these platforms comes from mainstream news outlets, which tend to make sure their content is accurate, truthful and impartial, other content comes from bloggers, influencers, **amateur** journalists and alternative outlets, which might spread **biased** or false information.

Social media companies also do not charge people for the content they consume. Instead, they make money through advertising and, therefore, want to keep people engaged on their platforms for as long as possible. Everything an individual does online leaves a digital footprint in the form of data, which allows tech companies to build profiles of their users and their interests, so that they can target them with relevant content and adverts using **algorithms**. The more time you spend online, the more in-depth the profile, the more effective the targeting, the more adverts you will see and the more

money tech companies can make. Targeted advertising can change people's behaviour – a political advert might encourage someone to vote a certain way in an election, or not to vote at all.

To help filter through online content and to keep people online longer, tech companies use algorithms that promote shocking content (people are more likely to click on/engage with content that triggers their emotions), and that make it easy for people to find content that aligns with their interests. But these approaches can come at a cost. Promoting content that triggers emotions can increase the likelihood of people seeing harmful content (long-term social media use has been shown to be harmful to the mental health of girls), and make online spaces divisive and abusive, which impacts how people feel about, and engage with, those who have different views offline. Pushing people towards content that aligns with their interests means they are not being exposed to a range of views: this means that people can access completely different information to others, and that competing versions of reality are emerging (the flat earth conspiracy theory is an example of this). Social media algorithms can, therefore, shape people's understanding of the world and their interests, and make them more suspicious of those who hold different views. They can also shape behaviour and the content people post: content creators are encouraged to post shocking content as it is more likely to be engaged with.

Tech giants have also made their platforms addictive to keep people online. Scrolling on social media platforms, and getting likes, views and notifications, releases dopamine, a brain chemical that makes us feel good. People can become addicted to seeking a dopamine release.

For over a decade, social media companies have not been regulated in the same way as traditional sources of information. In the UK, if the print media, television and radio share something false or harmful, they are fined and/or have to apologise. The UK's 2023 online safety bill makes social media companies more responsible for the content they show young people or risk being fined, but there is still a lack of information on how their algorithms work.

Many argue that, given their capacity to boost content and shape behaviour, algorithms should be designed to counter **polarisation** and division. One way could be for them to spread stories that help bring people from different groups together. However, there are ethical implications concerning the manipulation of people. Total transparency and more algorithmic regulation may therefore be better.

Connection Questions

1. What do you find surprising, interesting and/or troubling about what you have read?
2. What positive changes has social media brought to how people consume information?
3. How do social media companies make money?
4. How do social media companies boost user engagement? How does this impact the information people consume?
5. How are social media platforms addictive?
6. How, if at all, has content you have seen on social media influenced your opinions? How has it affected your emotions?

7. What, if any, impact have you noticed that social media has on people's relationships and the wider society?
8. What do you think needs to be done to counter some of the negative impacts of social media?