People share misinformation because of social media’s incentives — but those can be changed | Nieman Journalism Lab

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“After a few tweaks to the reward structure of social media platforms, users begin to share information that is accurate and fact-based.” (Though the tweaks involved paying people to do so.)

Is social media designed to reward people for acting badly?

The answer is clearly yes, given that the reward structure on social media platforms relies on popularity, as indicated by the number of responses — likes and comments — a post receives from other users. Black-box algorithms then further amplify the spread of posts that have attracted attention.

Sharing widely read content, by itself, isn’t a problem. But it becomes a problem when attention-getting, controversial content is prioritized by design. Given the design of social media sites, users form habits to automatically share the most engaging information regardless of its accuracy and potential harm. Offensive statements, attacks on out groups and false news are amplified, and misinformation often spreads further and faster than the truth.

We are two social psychologists and a marketing scholar. Our research, presented at the 2023 Nobel Prize Summit, shows that social media actually has the ability to create user habits to share high-quality content. After a few tweaks to the reward structure of social media platforms, users begin to share information that is accurate and fact-based.

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