



Session 5 – Scroll below the surface:

What is really happening on social media?

Key themes:

Helping pupils consider and reflect on what social media is really for and the way it is built. Considering how online platforms work and some of their purposes beyond hosting content and connectivity. Reflecting on the impact of social media on our worldview and the power social media has to change or impact our thinking

Key Questions:

- What do we see on the surface of social media – and what's hidden underneath?
- Why do social media platforms want to keep us online for as long as possible?
- How do algorithms decide what to show us – and what do they leave out?
- What is an echo chamber, and how might it affect what we believe?
- Why does extreme or dramatic content often get more views and shares?
- Are there rules about what can or should be posted online – and who makes them?
- How can we make smart choices about what we watch, like, or share online?

Curriculum Links: ([click here](#))

Delivery guidance: ([click here](#))

Aim – The aim of this lesson is to help you understand how social media really works. They explore why platforms try to keep your attention and how what you see online might shape your ideas.

Ground rules:

- **Confidentiality:** We might talk about personal things, people will share their views, opinions or experiences. This is a safe place for you to be open and honest. We need to know that the things people say doesn't get talked about outside this room
- **Respect:** Discussions need to be respectful, allow people the chance to talk, don't talk over each other. Don't speak about other people in the group or in school.
- **Tolerance:** There will be lots of time to discuss, ask questions and express opinions. We may not always agree and this is ok.
- **Fun:** This is meant to be fun, we will talk about some things that will make you want to laugh, we will be able to be silly at times and laugh at each other. However, if it becomes unkind or rude then I will stop us. We need to know when to stop as some of the things we talk about will be important and serious.

Warm up – What is social media for?

(Why this? – this activity sets a positive tone around social media rather than the negatives pupils are often taught. They have some space to share why social media is an important part of life for them)

Activity – Mindmap – what’s great about social media and the online world? What do you use it for? Name some favourite content/streamers/influencers etc.

Reflection Question – where did social media come from?

Below the Surface?

(Why this? – this activity encourages pupils to begin to critically reflect on the content they see and what is happening below the content)

Activity – Show an iceberg image on the board labeled:

Ask: **“What do we usually see online? What do we not see?”**

- **Above the water:** Funny videos, likes, posts, comments, friends, adverts – “content”
- **Below the water:** Algorithms, programming/coding, marketing, echo chambers,, regulations/restrictions

Definition – **“content”**– The things people make and share on the internet, like videos, pictures, articles, games, or social media posts.

Examples include: YouTube videos, TikTok or Instagram posts, Snapchat or WhatsApp messages, blogs or news article, podcast, memes or funny picture, online games

“Attention seekers!”

(Why this? – pupils begin to think about how the content they see is not random. Content is not just about entertainment but is focussed on grabbing and keeping our “attention”)

Show Pupils 5–6 Headline Examples – a mix of headlines/thumbnails/posts/clickbait etc, (click [here](#) for a printable sheet of examples for pupils to look at)

Ask & Vote: “Which headline would YOU click on first – and why?”

“What made that one stand out?” Write answers on the board (e.g., surprising, scary, funny, emotional, weird, shocking).

Unpack – Explain that these types of posts are designed to grab your attention fast using things like:

Curiosity or mystery (“You won’t believe...”)
Emotions (shock, anger, awe)

Lists or numbers (“Top 10...”)
Big promises (“Everything you need to know...”)

Definition – “attention economy” – Apps, websites, and social media try really hard to get your attention because the longer you watch, scroll, or click, the more money they can make (usually from ads).

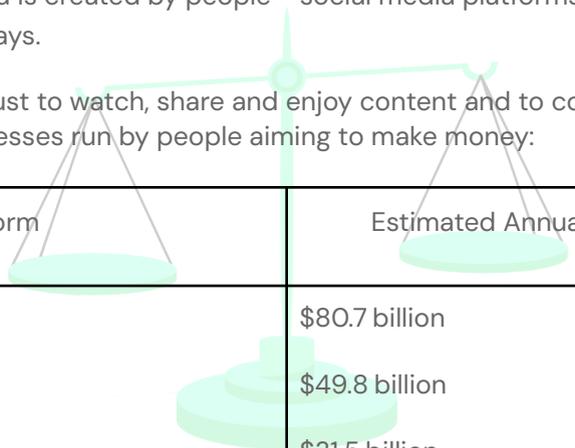
That’s why some content is made to be really exciting, funny, or surprising — even if it’s not always true or helpful.

Where does social media come from and what is it for?

(Why this? – pupils develop their awareness of the purposes behind how social media platforms organise and share content. Introducing pupils to the financial side of social media helps them be more critical of the content they are shown)

Discussion – Social media is created by people – social media platforms are created, coded and programmed in certain ways.

We see them as a place just to watch, share and enjoy content and to connect with other people. BUT – they are also businesses run by people aiming to make money:



| Platform | Estimated Annual Revenue (approx.) |
|-----------|------------------------------------|
| Facebook | \$80.7 billion |
| Instagram | \$49.8 billion |
| YouTube | \$31.5 billion |
| WeChat | \$16.3 billion |
| TikTok | \$16.1 billion |

How does social media make money? **Attention!** Most online platforms are aiming to keep your attention for as long as possible so that you view more ads. This is how platforms make money. This is why they try to make content as eye-catching as they can, why they make it easy to view content by scrolling through and autoplaying it.

Definition – “echo chamber” – “An echo chamber is when you mostly see the same ideas or opinions over and over online. This happens because websites and apps show you things they think you will like. It can make it feel like only one opinion is normal, and you might miss out on other points of view.”

Echo Chamber Challenge

(Why this? - this activity makes the idea of the “echo chamber” more “real” by pupils actually experiencing the idea of hearing the same messages over and over)

Activity - Give pupils opinion/content cards - [click here](#)
(e.g. **Opinion** - “Cats are better than dogs”, **Content** - “Videos of stupid dogs”, “cute cat memes”, “article proves cats are the cleverest animals” etc.)

Pupils group together by theme (e.g. cats, football, boys vs girls etc) with others who share the same kind of cards. Groups make a circle. The pupil with the opinion cards stands in the middle, the others hold up and read their cards – this is the “echo chamber.”

Reflection Question - How might an “echo chamber” impact your opinions and views?
How does it feel when everyone agrees with you? What’s good/bad about it?

Mix the groups so pupils are hearing lots of different viewpoints.

Discuss - “What happens when opinions are different?” What is good about hearing different opinions? What is hard about hearing different opinions?

6 Step Scrolling Spiral

(Why this? - this activity helps pupils reflect on how the algorithm leads pupils to increasingly unhealthy or extreme content)

Activity - Set the Scene - provide an example of a safe and simple everyday interest e.g. fitness

We can start by searching for something simple like “get fit”. However, step-by-step as we scroll the videos we are sent are likely to get more extreme.

- 1) “How to get fit”
- 2) “3 of the best stretches before exercise”
- 3) “Get abs in 10 days”
- 4) “How to get the best celeb body”
- 5) “3 foods that will **RUIN** your body”
- 6) “Fat is a choice! - how to choose healthy”

Question - “How did we get from stretching to negative views about weight?” Have you ever experienced a “scrolling spiral” like this with recommended content becoming more extreme and unhealthy?

Repeat the activity with other themes (e.g. gaming, beauty tips, romance & relationships, climate change) either as a whole class or in smaller groups. (download worksheet [here](#))

Ask pupils to complete a 6 step scrolling spiral considering how an everyday interest could begin to turn into extreme content and views.

Definition – “Algorithm” – The computer program that decides what posts, videos, or adverts you see. It watches what you like, share, or click on, and then shows you more of the same to keep you scrolling.

- Our brains are naturally drawn to **strong emotions** like fear, anger, shock or amazement.
- This means dramatic or extreme content often grabs our attention – even if it’s not helpful or true.
- Algorithms aim to keep you interested, so they show you stronger, more emotional, or more surprising content.
- You’re more likely to click on something dramatic or shocking, even without meaning to.
- The longer you stay, the more ads they can show – so platforms have a reason to keep turning up the volume.
- It can slowly change how we see ourselves or others without us noticing.

Rules, regulations & responsibilities

(Why this? – this activity provides space for pupils to begin to talk openly about their experiences and views of the restrictions and safeguards online. They reflect on why these safeguards are there and whether they are effective)

In the real world, there are rules to keep people safe – like seatbelts in cars or age limits for films. But online, it’s not always clear who’s making the rules. Social media companies can decide their own rules



Discuss – What restrictions and rules are in place to keep us safe online?

What limits are in place to keep people safe and stop harmful or extreme content? Do they work? Do young people follow the restrictions? Why/why not? Should social media have more restrictions and limits?

"Who's in Charge?"

Who decides what content is allowed online?

Are there clear rules? Who's watching & checking to make sure things are safe?

"You're the boss" –

(Why this? – asking pupils to try to solve the problem of harmful content themselves helps them reflect on how difficult it is to find an answer)

Plenary – in small groups pupils discuss and decide on 3 things they would do if they were the CEO of a social media company. Feedback to the class.