

Social Media Landscape Briefings 2019: The fragmentation of social media into niche social platforms

By  [Juanita Pienaar](#)

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The local instalment of the Social Media Landscape Briefings was held at the Sports Science Institute in Cape Town, at the end of last month. One of our BizTrends contributors, Godfrey Parkin from Britefire, was there to talk us through the fragmentation of social media into niche social platforms.



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Parkin started off his presentation by reminding the audience that a lot of us in marketing came from the days of advertising and media and then eventually we moved into social media to look at ways we can get closer to our customers – trying to understand our customers a little better.

Then along came Facebook. Facebook had some golden years but then the urge to make money became the driving force behind the social media giant. Parkin said that, since then, it actually deteriorated in terms of its management philosophy.

Over time, we've seen an increasing fragmentation of social media. There's been a huge concentration around Facebook and Parkin said over time we all became Facebook junkies and those of us who are in the social media marketing space saw this as our future.



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Godfrey Parkin 14 Jan 2019



He stated that social media is the biggest social revolution that the world has seen over the last five to eight years. "But what would Karl Marx have thought about where we are now and would he have approved?" he asked.

Social media is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

With apologies to Marx (and religion)



@gparkin

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Marx was talking about religion but Parkin said that this quote applies 100% to social media today. It has become the driving force behind who we see ourselves as and where we are going in life.

Algorithms and surveillance

Algorithms are driving the destruction or future irrelevance of Facebook. "All of those platforms have become hooked on algorithms because they are growing so fast. There is so much data that it is impossible for a human being to push a button or make a decision fast enough or accurately enough. So algorithms have kicked in as being the way Facebook, particularly, drives its engagement."

Increasingly, those algorithms are being tweaked to make the platform more and more addictive. So behind the scenes algorithms are driving what you see on your feed. You only tend to see the stuff that Facebook thinks is going to give you joy.



Would you give up social media to guarantee a lifetime of data privacy?

20 Jun 2019



As a result, we tend to live more and more in the bubble of our own making. We don't get exposed to stuff outside our space. We don't get exposed to people outside of the people we know. We don't get exposed to ideas – outside of the ideas that we have expressed an interest in.

Social media has actually trapped us into a bubble. And, for many people, that bubble has become a very depressing place to be because it's very inward-looking.



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So the algorithms drive the engagement and the evil in that situation is that it is used for surveillance. If you got all of this amazing data and you can see what people are responding to and what works and what brings them back and what makes them want to engage – you use your data analytics as a surveillance tool into the private lives of these individuals.

You end up manipulating the experience to make it more addictive. To make it more compelling.

What do you do when you are a publically-listed company? You start targetting both the media and the experiences that you are providing to your users. But you also start to allow targetting to advertisers. And allow advertisers to have access to that insight.

The surveillance has also become more and more sophisticated and, therefore, advertisers are paying more and more. Parkin said that it leads to us ending up in a cycle of big brotherism, which is what is starting to cripple an organisation like Facebook because the EU is realising that they are actually abusing their power.

“ *"With great power comes great responsibility."* ”

Attention-hacking Parkin said that while some of us were incredibly amused when we were watching Mark Zuckerberg when he was being interrogated by the Senate Committee, what came through was that he didn't care and that Facebook was above morality.

Facebook has become very good at what is called "attention-hacking", and the social platforms have become very good at hacking into that attention and retaining it. Once upon a time, social media made you really happy. But, today, it increasingly de-personalises the connections that you're making and damages mental health.

Social media is linked to depression, anxiety, poor sleep quality, lower self-esteem, inattention and hyperactivity – especially in young people. This is according to the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*.

He also said that these algorithms exploit surveillance and they try to maximise your social engagement addiction, and optimise advertising – which has made the experience toxic.

Social media usage now just makes people more sad and lonely. The more connected you are, the more unhappy you become.

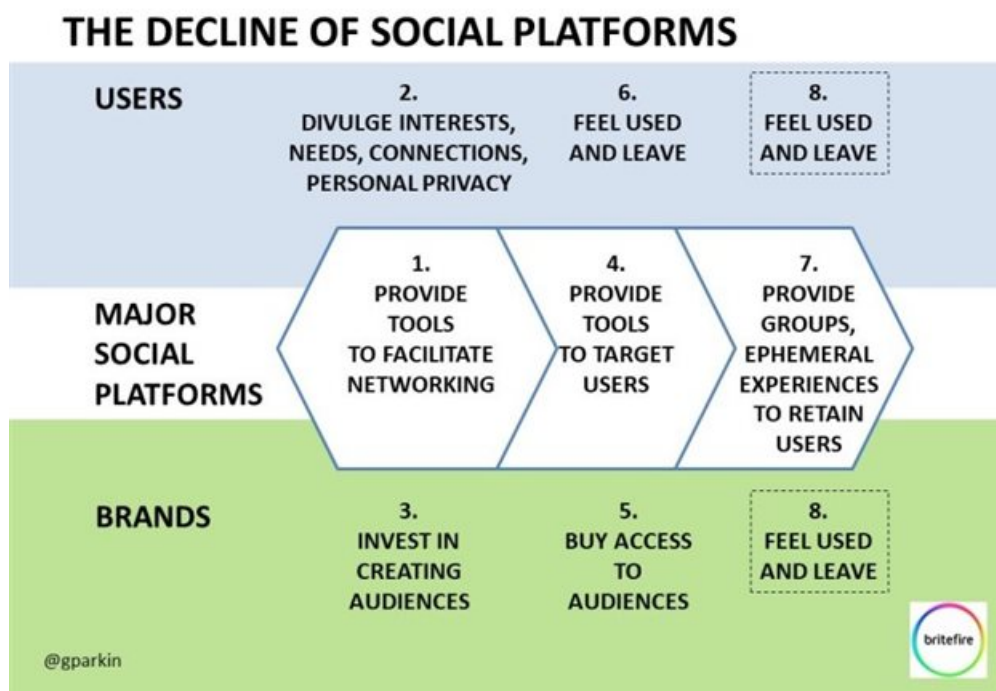
Unhappy people tend to use social media more than happy people do – which, from a marketer's point of view, is a little disappointing because it means that you have less-attentive and less-receptive people. Parkin said the "attention-quality" of those we target on social is degrading.

“ Over the next couple of years, we are going to see a lot of those high-quality audience members moving out of Facebook and moving into niche social platforms where they feel they can relate to the other members more closely and they feel a lot more safer. ”

He said that this doesn't mean marketers should stop advertising on Facebook. There is still a big audience that you can reach but it is not necessarily the highest-quality audience and it's not necessarily going to be the most value in terms of return on the advertising investment.

The decline of social media platforms

Parkin spoke more about the decline of social platforms and provided a slide to show a timeline of events:



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He stated that:

- **Users** will come to see Facebook (and similar services) as deliberate abusers of personal privacy and of self-esteem
- **Niche networks** founded on trust and specific mutual interests will blossom. Advertising will fall, experience sponsorship will rise
- **Brands** will come to see Facebook (and similar services) as the greatest corporate bait-and-switch scam of the century

If you are in the marketing business and if you are in the social media business, you need to start thinking strategically about what you are willing to do as a business. Because, as a business, there are huge opportunities.

Retaining attention retention via niche networks is one of these opportunities. But how?

- We're already seeing it with internet pivoting to subscriptions, paywalls, private-walled gardens. For example, you have to pay if you want to get into *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Economist*
- Some of the social and messaging platforms are also starting to niche out as well. Slack has channels, Facebook has

groups, Reddit has subreddits, Instagram has threads. Amazon bought Goodreads and Twitch. A lot of the bigger brands are beginning to understand that user experience has to be both offline and online, and that providing a social user experience that relates to your products is a really useful thing to do

- You need to start asking yourself what is your brand social strategy?

Examples of niche networks include:



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Social media is still influential

Over 40% of Gen Z favour direct-to-consumer products. At least 52% of their brand discovery comes from social channels according to an eMarketer study. But, increasingly, that discovery takes place in niche networks and in dark conversations – where people feel safe. The phenomenon of TikTok is a classic example of this.

Also WeChat. The reason WeChat is so big in Asia is because it's got a lot of micro-apps, and it's constantly doing really interesting things and focused on making people feel good rather than trying to make people addicted to the platform.

As brands, we need to invest more in sponsoring or contributing to authentic niche environments where our target market is going to hang out.



Emerging markets into the future

Danette Breitenbach 18 Nov 2013



The role of social agencies and content creators must evolve into being more expert in trusted conversational marketing.

We also need to be cognizant of the tools that we're using to listen to this data. Dark conversational social has become difficult to listen to, encrypted messaging makes it hard to see what's actually going on, subcultures and tribalism are all growing and making monitoring harder.

Social media intelligence looks for the "why?" rather than anything else. We're not tracking the stats of what happened. We're really interested in why it happened. Because if you understand why it happened, you can then start to modify the user experience.

AI-driven social intelligence tools: Metigy optimises owned channels to get better engagement; Leadza optimises ad campaigns; Iris in Brandwatch can do in two seconds what a human analyst takes four hours to do.

Parkin warned that the fact that advertisers/marketers are advertising on some of these platforms, even in doing so benevolently, it doesn't mitigate the enabling offence of privacy invasion. If you are funding surveillance, you are complicit. And advised reviewing your policy.

Can social become a power for good?

With two billion monthly users, Facebook can impact the future of the internet, society and capitalism.

- Pay users for their data and participation (Stablecoin)
- Pay online content creators (like Youtube, Medium)
- Improve matching of people
- Search: Sharing people's expertise and experience
- Create a social credit system rewarding people for doing social good
- Provide serious enterprise interoperability solutions

In conclusion

1. Big platform social media marketing is a mirage
2. Social media connects brands with potential customers in their least desirable mental state
3. If relationships are the goal, don't be hitting people up as they pass on the escalator taking selfies
4. Algorithms, sockpuppet accounts, fake news, faux authenticity, surveillance and privacy legislation are killing marketing effectiveness on social.
5. Quality time matters and makes the engagement experience positive. To engage in a niche, not a public forum.

He ended off his presentation by saying that we are at the end of the industrial-age for social media. People are moving to subculture networks and we should follow them.

Social Media Landscape Briefings is an event that was organised by Marketing Mix Conferences. For more information, visit the website by clicking [here](#). For more on Britfire and what they do, click [here](#) and you can connect with Godfrey Parkin on [LinkedIn](#) or [Twitter](#).

ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the former editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She was also a contributing writer.

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