

Depictions of Social Media in Scripted Entertainment

Thematic Analysis of Scripted TV and Film
Storylines Addressing Social Media

PREPARED FOR:

Luminate

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The Media Impact Project

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research Overview

Objective: To understand how social media platforms are portrayed and discussed in scripted TV and film across three western media markets: United States (US), United Kingdom (UK) and France.

Research Questions:

- What are the main themes through which social media is discussed in scripted content?
- What are the types, causes of, and solutions to social media-related harms, as portrayed in popular scripted content?

To address these research questions, the USC Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project (MIP) — with support from Luminate Strategic Initiatives — conducted a thematic content analysis of 67 scripted TV episodes and 37 movies.

Methods

To identify a sample of scripted content with substantive mentions of social media, we began with the following:

- French content:
 - Identified the most popular TV episodes and films over the last 10 years (2015-2024), using IMDB Pro's popularity meter.
 - Retrieved subtitles from OpenSubtitles.org.
- English content:
 - Identified all English-language mentions (includes content from both US & UK) in TV episodes and films in the last 10 years (2015-2024) in the Norman Lear Center Script Database.

We searched the transcripts for 40 big tech keywords in both English and French.

Methods

- French content (2,631 transcripts):
 - 728 keyword mentions (average of one every four scripts)
 - The top three keywords were Facebook (20% of all mentions), réseaux sociaux / social media (19%), and Twitter (13%)
- English content (66,743 transcripts):
 - 37,649 keyword mentions (average of one every two scripts)
 - Social media (17%), Facebook (15%), Instagram (12%)

Methods

We narrowed the sample to 100 episodes and movies that mentioned social media most frequently:

- Because US content dominated, we imposed a lower threshold for inclusion of UK and French content.
- 24 episodes* with only incidental mentions of social media were excluded from subsequent analyses.

The final sample for in-depth analysis consisted of 76 episodes (57 TV episodes and 19 movies):

- 61 from the US
- 7 from the UK
- 8 from France

* Hereafter, we use “episodes” to refer to both TV episodes and movies.

Key Findings

- Most substantive depictions of social media were problem-oriented and focused on harms resulting from social media use.
- Responsibility and blame for these harms was mostly attributed to character flaws of ordinary individuals.
- Suggested solutions were centered around individual decisions—like choosing to quit social media.
- Systemic causes of—and solutions to—social media harms were depicted very rarely.

Recommendations for Content Creators

- **Name** monopolistic corporations (real or fictional) and their algorithms as key sources of social media-related harms.
- **Highlight** legislation or government regulation as a potential solution to social media-related harms.
- **Demonstrate** ordinary people organizing and working together to bring about social change.
- **Avoid** portraying individual social media users—especially teenagers—as primarily responsible for causing harms.
- **Combine** personal stories with depictions of broader systemic problems.
- **Create** stories that show a variety of social media problems affecting diverse demographics and age groups.



DETAILED FINDINGS

Sample Format and Genre

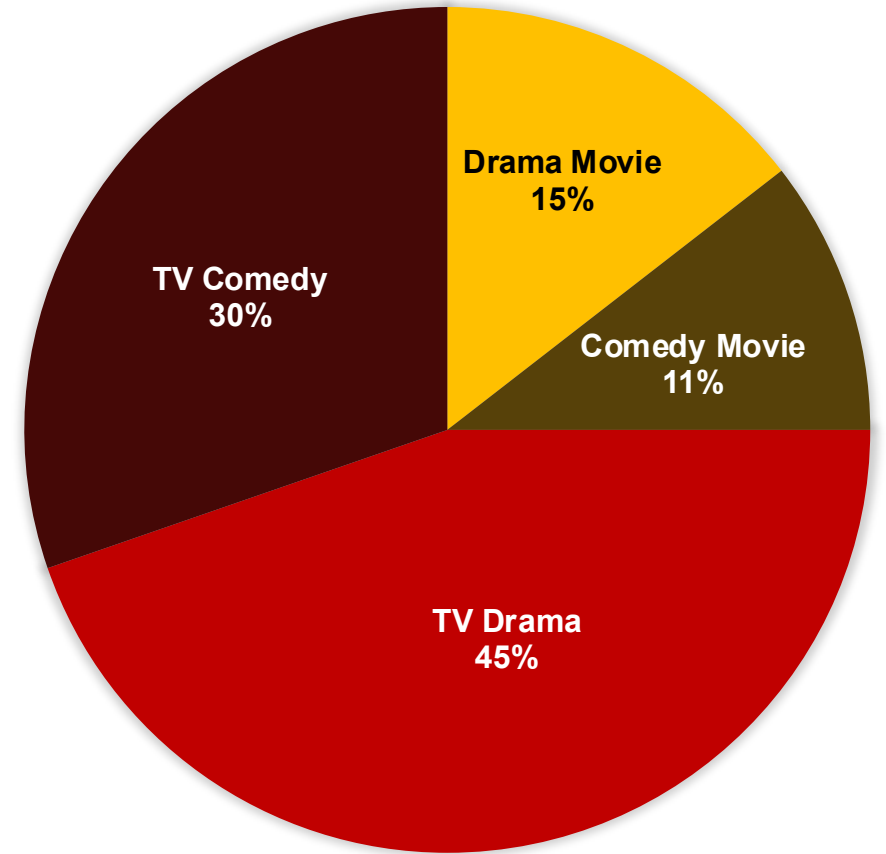
Sample Format and Genre

57 TV episodes:

- 22 comedies/sitcoms
- 22 crime procedurals
- 11 dramas
- 1 children's comedy*
- (Henry Danger)
- 1 teen drama (All American)

19 movies:

- 8 comedies
- 11 dramas/thrillers

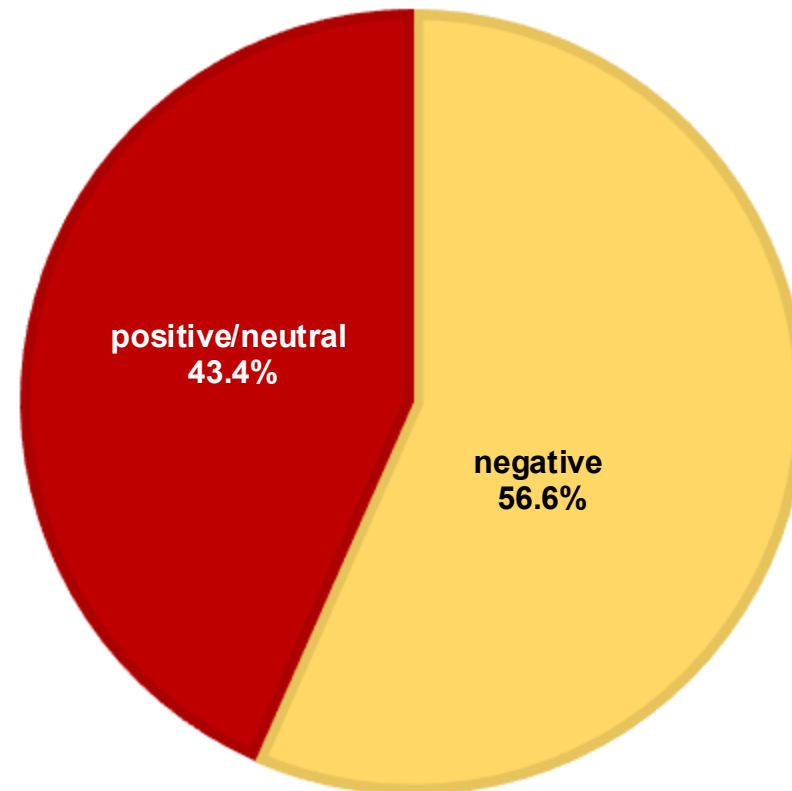


*Most episodes in our sample were not intended for an audience comprised of children or teenagers. (The median age of network TV primetime content audience members is 65 years old.)

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/tv-viewers-oldest-audiences-1235910778/>

Focus on social media

- 24% of episodes had only incidental or brief depictions of social media
- 76% had substantive content related to social media:
 - 43% of these (33) framed social media in a neutral or positive way
 - 57% of these (43) framed social media in a negative way

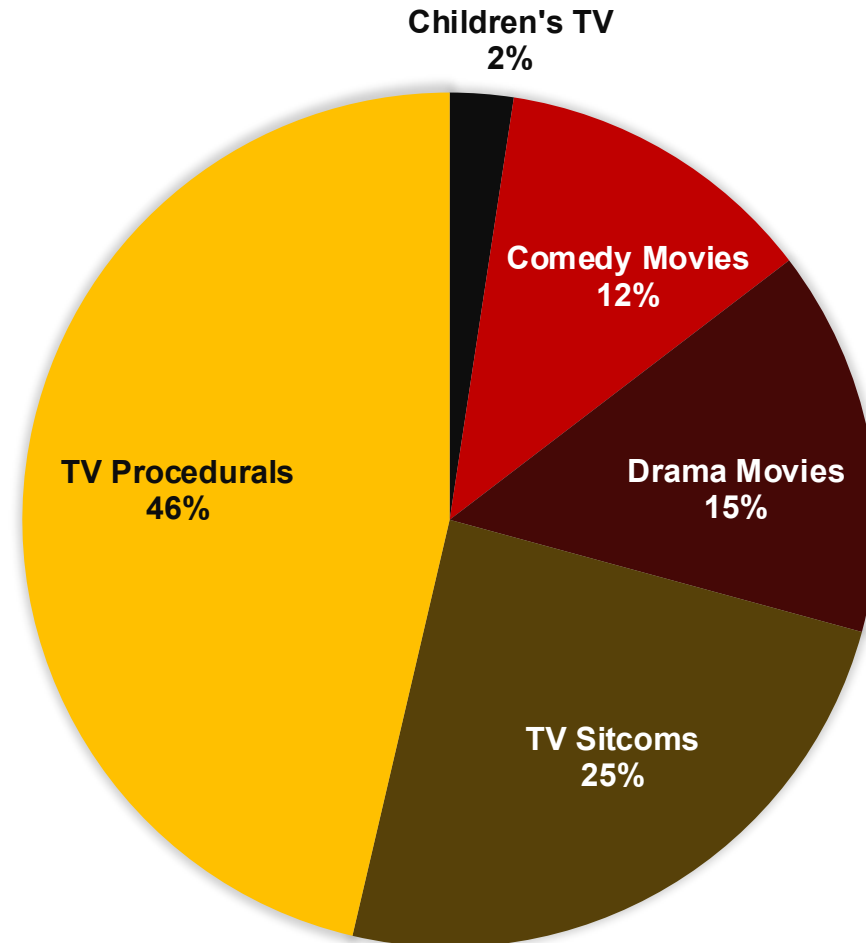


33 episodes with substantive social media content portrayed social media as *neutral or positive* overall

- In *Emily in Paris*, social media is portrayed as a powerful tool for promoting a French luxury brand
- *The Paynes* shows social media being used to successfully advertise a small business
- *The Bold Type* shows a young American woman using social media to foster diversity at a magazine company
- In several crime procedural TV episodes, social media technology is depicted largely as a tool for helping solve crimes and catching criminals

43 episodes portrayed social media in a negative way (problem framing)

Procedurals accounted for nearly half (44%) of the episodes with problem framing, but only 32% of the overall sample



43 episodes portrayed social media in a negative way (problem framing)

The most commonly depicted social media-related problems were:

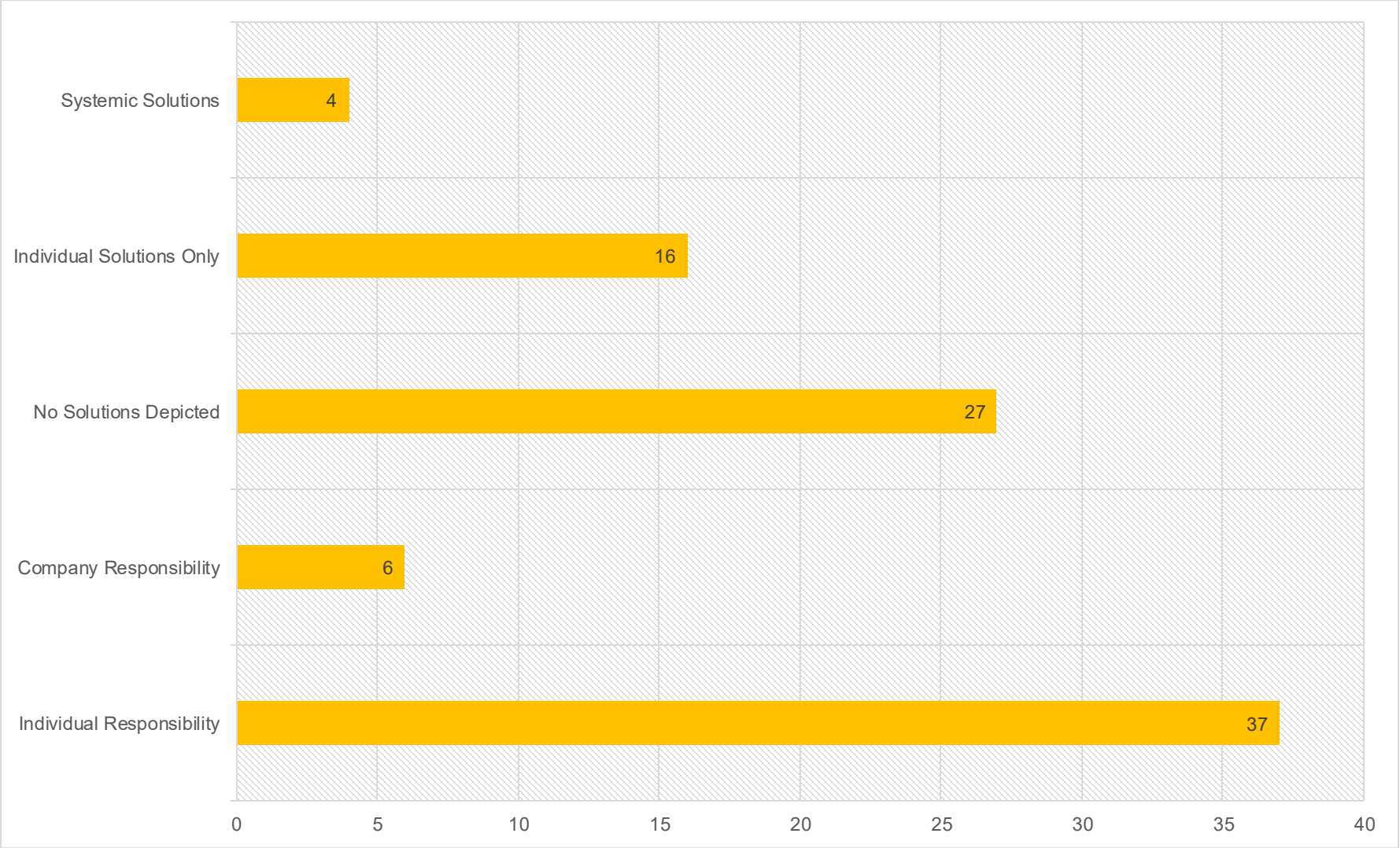
- Online harassment (18)
- Misinformation (17)
- Public humiliation (15)
- Toxic pursuit of fame (15)
- “Trolling” (9)
- Hate speech (6)
- Privacy issues (6)

Social media problems commonly resulted in physical danger to children

- 26 episodes involved physical violence or bodily harm
- 17 episodes highlighted the ways in which social media harms teens
- 9 episodes involved child safety issues
- 7 involved suicide or suicidal ideation

Framing

“Problem” episodes showed a mixture of individual and systemic causes/solutions to social media harms



37 episodes (86% of “problem” episodes) framed social media harms as resulting largely from the character flaws of groups or individuals

- “Teenagers have always been cruel. When did they become cowards? Since the invention of the internet.”
–*Law & Order: SVU*
- “Standard teen idiocy.” –*Magnum PI*
- “When I was a child, I wanted to be an astronaut. These days, kids want to be famous. Doesn't matter if they're famous for curing cancer or kicking in doors. Fame is the endgame. That's...problematic, but what is more problematic is that there are predatory adults like the defendant who used this desire to manipulate children in order to make a fast buck.” –*Law & Order*

6 episodes (14% of “problem” episodes) implicated real or fictional social media companies as partially responsible for causing harm

- An episode of *The Good Fight* shows how a social media company manipulates their algorithm to hide certain kinds of inconvenient political speech
- The movie *Don't Look Up* portrays a powerful social media company creating misinformation and distracting people from important real-world problems in order to turn a profit
- An episode of *Chicago Justice* portrays a social media company as complicit in gang violence insofar as it enables gang members to freely communicate

27 episodes (63% of “problem” episodes) did *not* suggest any concrete solutions to an social media-related problem

These episodes tended to frame social media-related problems as inevitable or unsolvable:

- “You can't control social media.” –*Instinct*
- “The world can be brutal.” –*South Park*
- “Social media's not going away.” –*NCIS*
- “It's a whole new world out there. I don't know what to make of it...The truth is, even if we pretend the digital world doesn't exist, babe, [children are] gonna find it anyway.” –*NCIS: Los Angeles*

16 episodes (37% of “problem” episodes) suggested individual-centered solutions

- “He'll be less likely to engage in [cyber] bullying behavior because you know. So open up the conversation with him. Tell Aaron that you expect and you trust him to make better decisions. And if he doesn't, monitor him.” –*CSI: Cyber**
- “I'm doing a sort of a fast from my phone. From social media, technology basically. I'm doing a little bit of a...a detox.” –*Off the Hook*
- “I'll start censoring my tweets a little bit more, okay? And-and I'll make a deal with you. Once a month, you can delete my most offensive tweet, but only if it has less than 70 likes, and it's not favorited by a celebrity.” –*The Carmichael Show*
- *This message seems to be directed at adults and parents. The ultimate causes of the harm are ignorance, cruelty, peer pressure, and a mob-like diffusion of responsibility among a handful of teens. No systemic causes are referenced in this episode, and no social media companies are implicated. A proposed solution involves parents deciding to monitor and educate their children to “make better decisions.”

4 episodes (9% of “problem” episodes) suggested systemic solutions

- An episode of *The Good Fight* mentioned “an independent tribunal, a social media Supreme Court, to guide us toward greater transparency and accountability.”
- Another episode of *The Good Fight* discussed reforming Section 230*
- An episode of *South Park* depicted a Danish content moderation program
- An episode of *NCIS* referred to government content moderation as a solution to social media-related terrorism: “we've been tracking the activity and shutting down the bogus accounts before it escalates.
- Only one episode showed ordinary people collectively organizing to help create a systemic solution:
- The children of *South Park* Elementary organize a bake sale to help fund the Danish content moderation program: “we should all come together...As a school.”

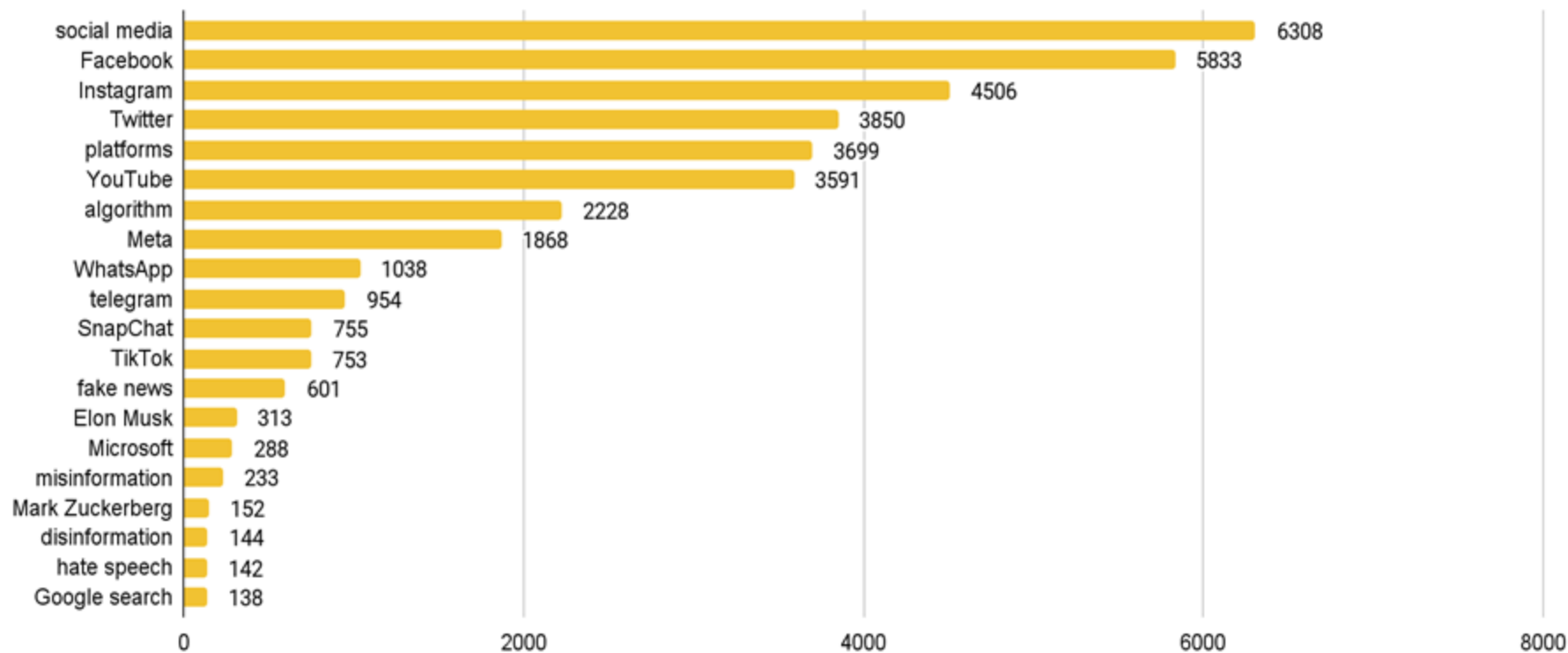
*Section 230 is a part of the Communications Decency Act of 1996. It protects online platforms from liability for content posted by users, shielding internet companies from being treated as publishers, and preventing them from being sued for user-generated content.



APPENDIX A: SAMPLING & CODING PROCEDURE

Appendix A

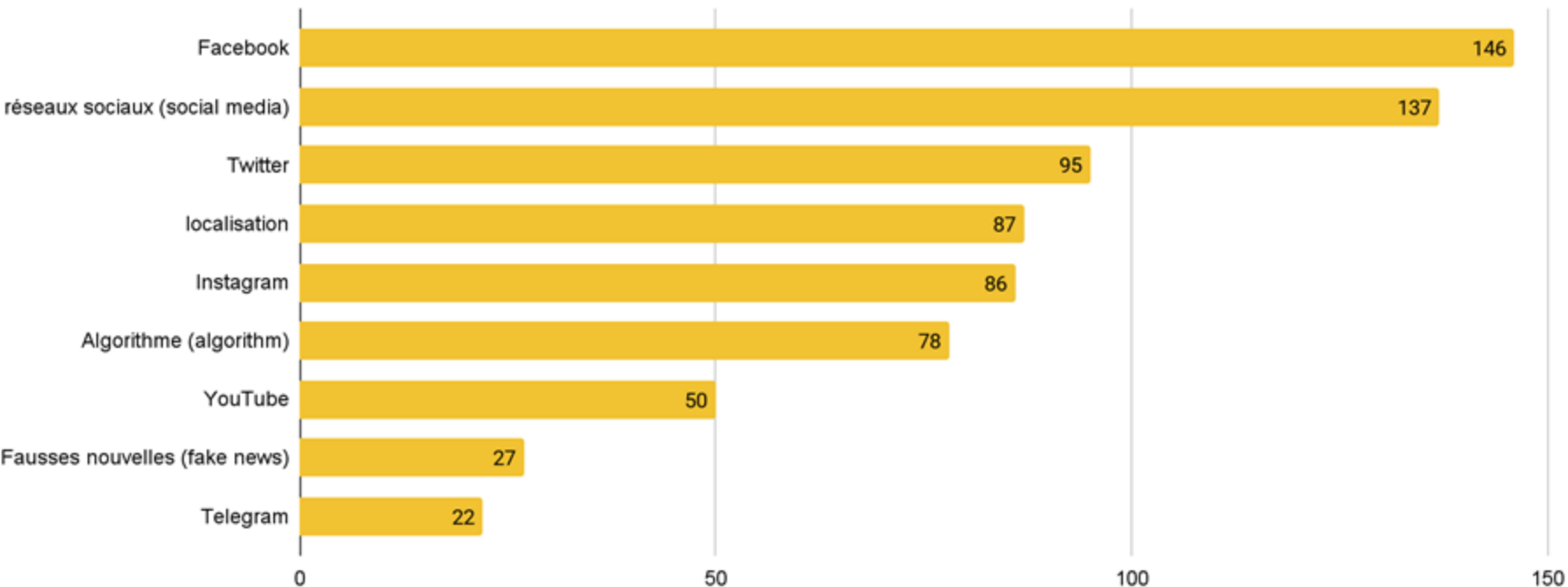
Technology Keyword Mentions in English Content:



The following keywords had between 1-88 mentions in English content:

cyberbullying, big tech, doxxing, targeted advertising, online harassment, online hate, content moderation, online abuse, attention economy, surveillance capitalism, recommendation system, Sam Altman

Technology Keyword Mentions in French Content:



The following keywords had between 1-20 mentions in French content: Alphabet, WhatsApp, TikTok, Snapchat, plates-formes (platforms), Désinformation (disinformation & misinformation), discours de haine (hate speech), Elon Musk, Publicité ciblée (targeted advertising), Google search, Microsoft & Mark Zuckerberg

The following keywords had zero mentions in French content: grande technologie (big tech), haine en ligne (online hate), Harcèlement sur internet (cyberbullying), abus en ligne (online abuse), Harcèlement en ligne (online harassment), contenu préjudiciable (harmful content), Contenu toxique (toxic content), Doxxing (doxing), Attention Économie (attention economy), Capitalisme de surveillance (surveillance capitalism), Publicité comportementale (behavioral advertising), Systèmes de recommandation (recommender systems), Modération du contenu (content moderation), moteur de recherche (search engine), Bytedance, OpenAI, Sundar Pichai, Sam Altman

Sampling procedure

As “social media” was the most commonly occurring term of interest in our database overall, we then identified the 4178 TV episodes and movies in the NLC transcript database released between 2015 and 2024 that mention “social media” (or “réseaux sociaux”) at least once:

- 2631 scripts were from the US
- 249 scripts were from the UK
- 137 scripts were from France

Appendix A

Sampling procedure

TV series and movies were not included in the sample if they were:

- Unscripted (i.e. reality TV)
- Unpopular (fewer than 2,000 ratings on IMDb)
- Supernatural horror movies with no wide theatrical release
- Network TV movies (i.e. Hallmark Channel Original Movie)

Appendix A

Sampling procedure

To account for the relatively large number of American TV episodes in our resulting sample, the following steps were then taken:

- All British and French TV episodes that mentioned “social media” at least twice (13) were included in the sample.
- All French, British, and American movies that mentioned social media at least twice were included in the sample (37 total).
- All American TV episodes that mentioned social media at least five times (33) were included in the sample.
- From our remaining list of American TV episodes that contained “social media” at least four times, 17 episodes were randomly selected.
- This resulted in a preliminary sample of 100 episodes/movies.

Appendix A

Sampling procedure

- After creating this sample of 100 episodes, we determined which of them had significant content devoted to social media by using coding software Atlas.ti's AI-enhanced topic summary function.
- In doing so, we identified 24 episodes whose only depictions of social media were explicit linguistic mentions that were merely incidental to the episode's plot or character development.
- These 24 episodes were not subjected to further analysis.

Analysis procedure

- For the remaining 76 episodes, themes involving social media were human-coded. Because these themes were coded inductively, they were not subjected to reliability analysis—which commonly pertains to previously defined categories, rather than categories that emerge within the coding process itself.
- We used AI-enhanced programming to conduct sentiment analysis. For episodes that were determined to portray social media in a negative light, additional inductive analysis determined what kinds of harms were shown, their effects, their causes, and any solutions depicted.
- In line with Luminate’s research interests, particular attention was paid to how often teenagers and children were shown being harmed by social media.



APPENDIX B

LIST OF ANALYZED EPISODES

TITLE	SEASON#	EPISODE#	COUNTRY
6 Underground*	Movie	Movie	US
American Son*	Movie	Movie	US
Accused	Movie	Movie	UK
Airplane Mode	Movie	Movie	US
All American	4	14	US
American Skin	Movie	Movie	US
Awkward	5	13	US
Barbarians	Movie	Movie	UK
Baron Noir	3	4	FRANCE
Being Mary Jane	4	16	US
Beyond the Neon	Movie	Movie	US
Black-ish	5	23	US
Black-ish*	6	12	US
Blue Bloods*	9	13	US
Brad's Status*	Movie	Movie	US
Bull	4	20	US
Chicago Justice	1	10	US
Coffee & Kareem*	Movie	Movie	US
Corporate	2	8	US
Criminal Minds	13	8	US
Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders	2	1	US
CSI: Cyber	2	16	US
CSI: Cyber	1	5	US
CSI: Cyber	1	7	US
CSI: Vegas	2	10	US

TITLE	SEASON#	EPISODE#	COUNTRY
Death In Paradise	11	7	UK
Death In Paradise*	7	3	UK
Destruction: Los Angeles*	Movie	Movie	US
Dinner Party	Movie	Movie	UK
Don't Look Up	Movie	Movie	US
Dumb Money	Movie	Movie	US
Dumplin'*	Movie	Movie	US
Elementary	5	23	US
Emily in Paris	1	5	US
Emily in Paris	1	1	US
Equity	Movie	Movie	US
Every Day*	Movie	Movie	US
Family Guy	16	18	US
FBI	1	16	US
FBI	3	13	US
FBI: International	1	20	US
Fiasco	1	1	FRANCE
Fiasco	3	1	FRANCE
Grown-ish	1	8	US
Henry Danger	2	5	US
High Flying Bird	Movie	Movie	US
Instinct	2	4	US
Inventing Anna	1	9	US
Keeping Up with the Joneses*	Movie	Movie	US
Kidnapping Inc.	Movie	Movie	FRANCE

*Episodes marked with an asterisk did not have substantive content related to social media and were excluded from analysis.

TITLE	SEASON#	EPISODE#	COUNTRY
Late Night	Movie	Movie	US
Law & Order	22	12	US
Law & Order	21	3	US
Law & Order: Special Victims Unit	23	5	US
Law & Order: Special Victims Unit	19	4	US
Let's Get Physical*	1	1	US
Logan Lucky*	Movie	Movie	US
Love & Gelato*	Movie	Movie	US
Love Guaranteed	Movie	Movie	US
Madam Secretary	5	14	US
Magnum P.I.	4	4	US
National Champions	Movie	Movie	US
NCIS	12	18	US
NCIS Los Angeles	13	9	US
Off the Hook	1	1	FRANCE
Old Dads*	Movie	Movie	US
On the Line	Movie	Movie	US
Otherhood*	Movie	Movie	US
Professor T*	2	3	UK
Rebirth*	Movie	Movie	US
Sierra Burgess Is a Loser	Movie	Movie	US
Silent Witness	26	5	UK
South Park	20	5	US
South Park	19	5	US
South Park	20	3	US

TITLE	SEASON#	EPISODE#	COUNTRY
Step Up: High Water	1	7	US
Superintelligence	Movie	Movie	US
SWAT	2	14	US
Tandem*	1	8	France
The Bold Type	2	5	US
The Bold Type	2	1	US
The Bold Type	1	1	US
The Bold Type	3	1	US
The Bold Type	3	7	US
The Cage	1	1	FRANCE
The Cage	1	2	FRANCE
The Cage	1	4	FRANCE
The Carmichael Show	2	9	US
The F**k-It List	Movie	Movie	US
The Family Plan*	Movie	Movie	US
The Fanatic	Movie	Movie	US
The Gentlemen*	Movie	Movie	US
The Good Fight	3	8	US
The Good Fight	5	3	US
The Hustle*	Movie	Movie	US
The Independent*	Movie	Movie	US
The Night Before*	Movie	Movie	US
The Outlaws	2	3	UK
The Paynes	1	36	US
The Paynes	1	35	US

*Episodes marked with an asterisk did not have substantive content related to social media and were excluded from analysis.

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