# The Algorithm Trap: How Social Media Keeps Us Hooked (And What Could Change It)

Let’s talk about something that’s quietly running our lives, algorithms

Whether you’re scrolling through Instagram, doomscrolling on X (formerly Twitter), or diving into TikTok’s endless loop of 15-second videos, one thing is certain: you’re not just browsing. You’re being guided. And that guide? It’s an algorithm, carefully designed to keep you glued to your screen.

Even platforms that pride themselves on being “decentralized” or “privacy-first” like the fediverse, aren’t entirely free from algorithmic influence. (“Trending” section on Mastodon uses some sort of algorithms, although very distinct from the ones used on traditional platforms). Sure, they may offer chronological feeds or user-controlled timelines, but the moment personalization enters the picture, algorithms creep in. Because let’s be honest: attention is currency in the digital world.

### The Attention Economy: Why Algorithms Rule

The goal of traditional social media giants is simple: keep you on the app as long as possible. The longer you stay, the more ads you see, the more data you generate, and the more money they make. And honestly? They’ve nailed it.

Think about your own routine. How many of us wake up and immediately reach for our phones? We unlock, open Instagram, check TikTok, scroll through Twitter, before we’ve even brushed our teeth. And at night? Chances are, the last thing you do isn’t reading a book or talking to a loved one. It’s mindless scrolling.

This isn’t accidental. It’s engineered.

Algorithms learn what makes you pause, what makes you double-tap, what makes you watch a video three times. They feed you content like a perfectly curated buffet, only it’s never-ending, and you didn’t ask for any of it. But hey, it feels good. TikTok shows you exactly the kind of videos you love. Instagram serves up memes that hit just right. YouTube recommends the next thing you didn’t know you needed. (Although recently I’ve found YouTube to become a bit boring, do better Google!)

It’s convenient. It’s addictive. And it’s working too well.

### A Generational Shift—And Not Necessarily for the Better

Having recently been kicked out of my teens, I’m old enough to remember a time when kids actually played outside after school. When boredom meant building forts or riding bikes, not pulling out a phone and opening TikTok.

Today’s kids? Many of them are growing up in a world where social media isn’t just part of life, it is life. And while there are positives (connection, creativity, access to information), the trade-offs are real. Less face-to-face interaction. Shorter attention spans. A constant craving for digital validation.

I’m not saying technology is evil. But when algorithms are optimized not for meaning, but for engagement, especially through outrage, fear, or FOMO, we start losing something human.

### What If We Just… Removed the Algorithms?

Here’s a thought: what if social media platforms stopped using manipulative algorithms altogether?

No more “For You” feeds. No more autoplay rabbit holes. Just chronological posts, real conversations, and content that earns attention, not stealing it.

From a user perspective, this would be a breath of fresh air. We’d spend less time doomscrolling. Our mental health might improve. Our self-control wouldn’t feel so broken because we wouldn’t be fighting against billion-dollar AI systems designed to exploit our psychology.

But here’s the twist: **it might actually benefit the companies too**.

### The Silver Lining for Big Tech

Without algorithms that manipulate user behavior, platforms could avoid a growing wave of lawsuits and public backlash. Governments around the world are starting to ask tough questions: Are these algorithms harming kids? Are they spreading misinformation? Are they designed to be addictive?

If platforms ditch the black-box recommendation engines, they could:

* Avoid legal liability tied to algorithmic manipulation. (nd examples of lawsuits)
* Improve public trust by being more transparent.
* Reduce regulatory pressure, especially as laws like the EU’s Digital Services Act set stricter rules on how algorithms can be used.

Sure, they’d lose some of the hyper-targeted engagement that drives ad revenue. But they’d gain something arguably more valuable: credibility.

Nd add findings that proves less screen time will be beneficial

### A Future Without Algorithmic Addiction?

Imagine a social media world where content spreads because it’s meaningful, not because it triggers outrage or exploits attention biases. Where creators focus on building real communities, not gaming the algorithm with clickbaity thumbnails or rage-bait captions.

It’s possible. But it would require a fundamental shift in priorities, from maximizing screen time to fostering genuine connection.

And honestly? That’s a future worth fighting for.

We can’t expect users to “just have more self-control.” When you’re up against AI trained on billions of data points, willpower doesn’t stand a chance. If we did have that kind of self-control, these addictions (nd, add stats for screen time/social media addiction) would not exist. The solution isn’t personal discipline, it’s design ethics.

So here’s my hope: that one day, we’ll look back at this era of algorithmic addiction like we now view cigarette ads targeting kids. As a dark chapter. A time when we let convenience override consciousness.

Until then? Maybe just… put the phone down. See what happens.

You might be surprised how much more life there is beyond the feed.