The bloom is off the rose

Are internet firms the problem, or are you the problem?

A veteran critic of technology offers his take on a familiar target

Picture perfect? Photograph: AP

Jan 30th 2025

Superbloom. By Nicholas Carr. *W.W. Norton; 272 pages; $29.99 and £19.99*

IN EARLY 2019 an unusual abundance of orange poppies appeared on the slopes of Walker Canyon, in the Temescal Mountains south-east of Los Angeles. Social-media influencers flocked to the scene to take pictures of themselves among the blossoms, prompting their followers to do the same. The "superbloom" of flowers produced a superbloom of people, trampling the poppies, causing gridlock and creating a public-safety hazard.

For Nicholas Carr, a thoughtful critic of technology and its consequences, all this is a metaphor for today's media-saturated world. Like poppies, social platforms look pretty, but a form of narcotic is contained within. "We live today in a perpetual superbloom—not of flowers but of messages," he writes in "Superbloom", which examines the unanticipated impacts of communications technologies.

As in his previous critiques of technological overenthusiasm, Mr Carr frames his argument against the ill effects of digital media using historical analogies. In 2004 his first book, "Does IT Matter?", argued that information technology, like previous innovations such as steam power and telegraphy, would be rapidly commoditised and that adoption could give companies only a short-term competitive advantage. Subsequent books considered the rise of cloud computing as a utility, the internet's impact on cognition (Google is making people stupid, Mr Carr argued) and the pitfalls of automation.

"Superbloom" starts by examining the long-standing belief that more and faster communication would not just be a good thing, but would inevitably promote education, understanding and peace. This idea goes back at least as far as the era of the electric telegraph, and Mr Carr extensively quotes Charles Horton Cooley, a 19th-century academic who first used the term "social media" and whose optimistic pronouncements sound very familiar today. Indeed, Cooley eerily prefigures the social-media prophets of 2010-11 who hailed the Arab spring as an example of technology's liberating power.

Such optimists failed to foresee the downsides of faster, easier communication, such as factionalism, authoritarianism and radicalisation. Guglielmo Marconi, an Italian inventor, thought radio would "make war impossible", but the Nazis used it for indoctrination. Mr Carr explains how digital networks brought previously separate forms of media together and eroded the distinction between conversations and broadcasting—a process that culminated in the introduction of the endless feed, pioneered by Facebook and since adopted by other social-media platforms. He details how unchecked self-expression on social media produces feelings of envy

and enmity, affects how people perceive themselves and others and has been blamed for causing loneliness and depression.

It is customary to blame profit-hungry tech firms for all this and to demand that they should be more heavily regulated or broken up. But Mr Carr takes a different tack. The problems associated with social media, and visible to a lesser extent with earlier forms of communication, are the result of the interplay between fundamental characteristics of digital networks on one hand and human nature on the other, he argues. By blaming social-media giants, "We let the net itself off the hook while also absolving ourselves of complicity."

He gives many examples of how digital media can exacerbate "deep-seated tendencies in human nature" that predate the internet. A study in 1976 of residents of a condominium complex, for example, found that proximity to other people was more likely to breed animosity than affection: enemies outnumbered friends among close neighbours. And on social media, everyone is a neighbour. Digital media do not change human nature, Mr Carr writes, "But they do accentuate certain aspects of it while dampening others". As a result, he argues, breaking up big tech firms is "unlikely to change social media's workings"; other companies, offering similar products, would simply take their place.

If break-ups are not the answer, what is? Mr Carr dismisses the notion of "frictional design", which aims to slow the sharing of information and make social platforms less engaging, as futile and likely to annoy users. He argues that it is "too late to rethink the system", so users need to change themselves instead and try to live "a more material and less virtual existence" through "personal, wilful acts of excommunication". Presumably he has in mind things like smartphone bans in schools and voluntary abstinence during "digital detox" days. But after such a detailed and persuasive diagnosis, Mr Carr's meagre prescriptions seem disappointingly vague.

Perhaps he is simply reluctant to repeat the suggestions made by Jonathan Haidt in "The Anxious Generation", published in 2024. But that points to a deeper problem. Like the poppy fields of Walker Canyon, the notion that social media have deleterious effects is well-trodden ground. Mr Carr's scepticism about the promises made by big technology firms felt bracingly provocative a decade or two ago. But bashing social-media platforms and the ways they manipulate their users' behaviour has become an overcrowded genre. The argument has now moved on to the implications of AI and tech bosses' cosiness with Donald Trump. Like the influencers who rushed to Walker Canyon, Mr Carr has ended up following the herd. ∎