

# Can humanity find a place in the rewired world?

As technology outpaces human evolution, *New Scientist CoLab* examines the tension between our social instincts and modern digital disruption

At first glance, things look bad: attention spans are shrinking, loneliness is on the rise, trusting news reports is harder than ever and far too much of our life's infrastructure is in the hands of just a few multi-billion dollar companies.

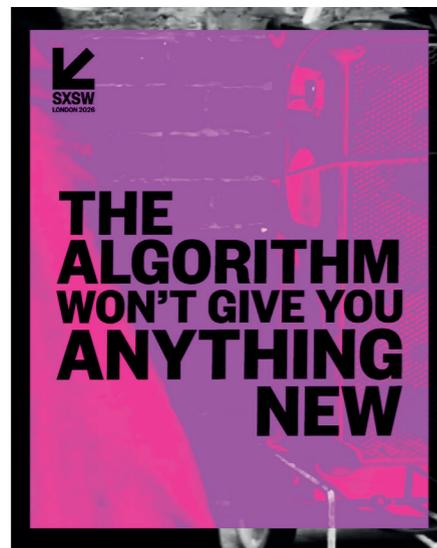
This overwhelming onslaught raises a crucial question: is this techno-enslavement society's destiny or can humanity fight back with clever, creative, socially-aware innovation? The signs are that it can and the green shoots of a brighter future are beginning to emerge. "I am optimistic that we will course-correct," says psychologist Gloria Mark of the University of California, Irvine.

These green shoots take the form of people shifting news consumption towards audio and influencer-led content over traditional text. A federated internet or "fediverse" is emerging in the form of a decentralised network of servers designed to reduce reliance on tech behemoths and enhance data rights. And there is a growing sense that technology can be designed from the bottom up to benefit broad swathes of society rather than a narrow set of wealthy individuals and investors.

## Transmission stamps

One of the major shifts of recent years has been the growing proportion of people who are listening to, rather than reading, news and other factual content, for instance. This significantly influences their impressions because listeners engage more strongly with negative aspects of a story than readers. "People tend to walk away with an understanding of news that is less nuanced and more negatively biased after listening to it versus reading it," says Shiri Melumad of the University of Pennsylvania.

Melumad's research also shows that when news gets passed between peers by verbal report rather than by forwarding a piece of



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text, the transmitter puts their own stamp on the story. "Retellings contain increasingly fewer original details from the story but more personal opinions and negativity," she says.

But Dominic Guitard, an applied psychologist at Cardiff University, thinks humans can find alternative ways to check their sources. "People may adapt by developing new strategies for evaluating information, particularly if audio content is paired with searchable transcripts, summaries or visual records," he says.

And technology itself is playing a part here, by making our news sources more personal and accessible. According to Pew Research, 21 per cent of adults in the US and 37 per cent of under-30s regularly get news content from creators and influencers, rather than traditional outlets. For some, that means the news becomes less trustworthy.

But that doesn't have to be the case. According to research published in *Nature Scientific Reports* last year, adopting the right technologies can significantly increase the credibility and authenticity of collected data. Incorporating Global Navigation Satellite Systems data and Android location flags, for instance, allows users to verify that the news source is where it claims to be. Additionally, blockchains can protect information from manipulation or modification.

## Enter the fediverse

The evolving infrastructure behind our online lives also has the potential to make it easier to trust content. Take the growth of the "federated internet", which is more resistant to interruption, disruption and censorship.

It also gives users greater flexibility in terms of data rights and the ability to connect with like-minded people without being tied to one platform. The microblogging social media service, Bluesky, for instance, is built on an open source protocol with a

standardised format for identity and data. The aim is that social apps are able to interact – although this is happening to highly varying degrees.

Not that the "fediverse" is a utopia. As numerous researchers have pointed out, bots populate the federated internet too. What's more, as Samantha Lai and Yoel Roth of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace wrote in 2024, "federated platforms remain ill-equipped to meet the threats of abuse, harassment, coordinated

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**Humans evolved in a different world but must now survive in a hypermodern society**

manipulation, and spam that have plagued social media for years." Ironically, they suggest that the answer might lie in some form of centralised moderation that builds safety and trust in decentralised social media platforms.

Such ideas are slowly being implemented, but the sluggish pace is due to technical and commercial challenges rather than reluctance. Indeed, many of the new companies building and evolving the internet and its deployment actively want to do things better. They campaign on a number of fronts: for more human-centred development, stronger regulation and legislation that limits the power and reach of algorithms, for instance.

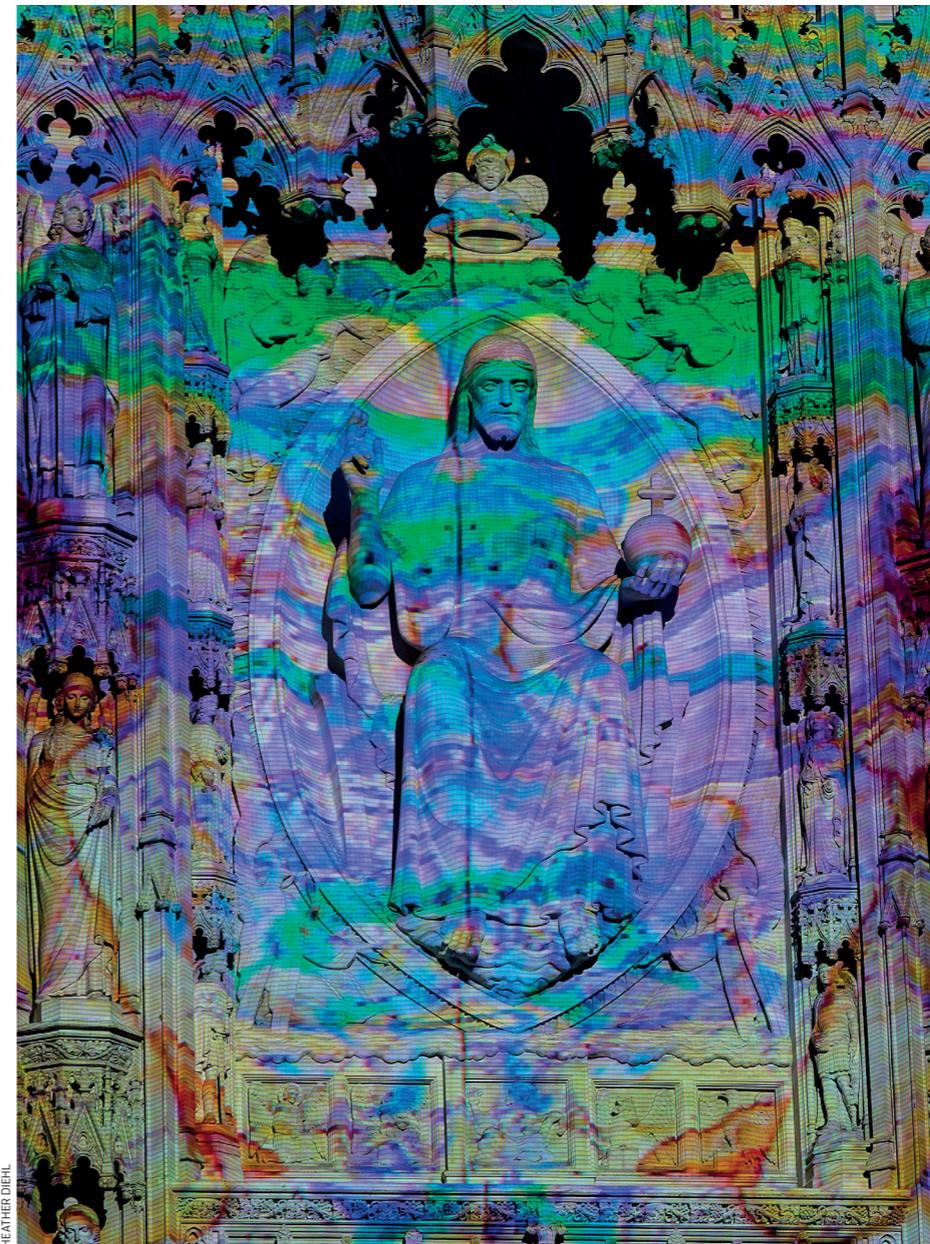
## Technology for good

One example is the DAIR Institute in California, whose founder, Timnit Gebru, will be speaking at SXSW London 2026. DAIR seeks to make sure AI develops in ways that benefit humanity. It uses measures such as assisting technology developers to remain within existing communities rather than working from Silicon Valley's silos.

Other organisations are building on our new power to connect with each other. The charity Chapter One, for instance, uses AI and other tech to source one-to-one support for children learning to read. Over 200 global corporations now partner with Chapter One to enable their employees to be online reading buddies.

Even though in-person reading buddies would probably be better, this is the shape of 21st century society: we just aren't as physically close to each other in the way we used to be. Mark reckons people are finding ways to adapt to this new normal. "One clear adaptation to loneliness is seen in the rise of synthetic companions: people turn to AI for friendship and relationships," she says. According to her research, the top six AI companies have around 52 million users of synthetic companions.

Mark will be discussing her research findings at SXSW London 2026 in the Society Rewired Track. She remains optimistic that we can make sure emerging technologies serve humanity, not the other way around. "I'm not a Luddite: I'm not about throwing away technology," she says. "I think instead we have to figure out how we can integrate technology into our lives – but on our terms." ■



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