How might we harness social media to bridge societal divides by supporting social connection, collective action and reducing polarisation?
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**Background**

- Social media has radically transformed how people, organisations, and governments connect and interact. As of 2020, more than 3.8 billion people all over the world use social media on a monthly basis (We Are Social, 2020). We live an increasing amount of our lives online, a trend that has only accelerated as a result of Covid-19.

- There is a growing recognition that social media has an important role to play in supporting collective action, knowledge sharing and enhancing social connection. Social media has helped bridge previously entrenched societal divides in multiple ways. Including: promoting imagination, transforming community justice, or creating a space for public discourse. Examples of this include the #metoo and #BringBackOurGirls movements, anti-racist ‘teach-ins’, and active engagement with radicalised communities by former hate group members.

- Social media has many positive aspects. Our priority should be to understand the ways in which social media can be used to promote tolerance and inclusion instead of division and exclusion. Areas of research currently include how social media can be manipulated by bad actors to cause harm - such as attempting to influence political processes, spread misinformation in response to Covid-19, or abuse or direct hateful conduct at other users or groups.

- Platform design, platform management and algorithmic design all have crucial roles to play in what content gets shared, and how users interact with social media. Transparency, explainability and consumer choice are increasing areas of focus for social media platforms. Some are beginning to look beyond a reactive response of limiting the impact of negative social media use, to promoting positive use as a cornerstone of a healthy society.

- For example, Twitter introduced a sparkle icon located at the top of individuals’ timelines to more easily switch on and off the ranking algorithm to the simple reverse-chronological timeline. More recently, they began experimenting with a new prompt - when you Retweet an article that you haven’t opened on Twitter, Twitter may ask if you’d like to open it first. Other social media platforms have considered similar changes to algorithms or their products to reduce unhealthy conversation online.

- It’s also important to consider that individual users have agency in how they interact with social media. They can choose to repost misinformation without checking sources, or curate a newsfeed that only showcases similar perspectives. Individual users could instead choose to use social media in a positive way, for example creating spaces for critical engagement around complicated topics, or checking for news sources before reposting.

**How to approach the brief**

- Identify a societal divide or connection that is important to you. This might be advancing equity across personal identity characteristics (such as gender, race, class, sexuality, citizenship or more), or may mean addressing a specific toxic behaviour (such as hate speech), or advancing a critical agenda (such as mitigating global warming).

- Consider how social media affects that divide or connection. Through both the user’s actions and the platform design. For example, if your design challenge focuses on how misinformation spreads, you may choose to focus on the users sharing content or alternatively, look at the algorithms accelerating the sharing of that content. Decide which lens is the most effective to address your challenge. This could be reimagining what a user does or reimagining how a platform is designed.

- Your analysis should investigate the following: Who uses social media? What functionalities are most relevant to social connections (e.g. creating groups, group pages, personal pages, direct messaging)? How do users behave on social media?
• Identify examples of how existing engagement on social media contributes to advancing societal connection or deepening societal divide. For example, how Wikipedia currently uses a decentralised, volunteer-led system to verify information on its platform.

• Make sure you map out user interactions, online and offline, that are involved in either advancing a way forward or contributing to the problem. Consider the impact of these interactions on people that might not be on social media.

• Get feedback from the stakeholders you identify, and work with them to co-design and test a feasible solution.

For the purposes of illustration only, viable responses could include:

• A browser plug-in that limits the speed at which information can be shared and changes how people interact with social media.

• A social media campaign that welcomes new people to engage in a challenging social justice conversation

• A face-to-face game that encourages people to examine and promote constructive uses of social media.

…and many more are possible.

**Partner Information:**

**Twitter**

Twitter, Inc. is the best place to see what’s happening and what people are talking about. Their mission is to serve the public conversation. Every day, instances of breaking news, entertainment, sports, politics, big events, and everyday interests happen first on Twitter. Twitter is where the full story unfolds with live commentary and where live events come to life, unlike anywhere else.

**Build Up**

Build Up transforms conflict in the digital age. We use peacebuilding best practices, participatory methodologies and digital technologies to identify and address emergent challenges to peace.

We use digital technologies to build peace: we support peace innovators across the globe, working with local organizations to design and implement technology interventions for peacebuilding processes that address divisions in society. We transform conflicts that happen in digital spaces: we conduct research and interventions to address polarization on social and digital media in contexts across the globe.

We host a global community of practice around peace and technology, convened at an annual conference.

**Judging Criteria**

Your entry should demonstrate a design thinking approach to the brief and clearly communicate the following principles:

**Social and environmental impact:**

How does your proposal make a positive difference for people and/or the natural world in your chosen context? How is your approach empowering people? Have you considered effective use of resources including materials and processes? Have you considered diversity and inclusion in your proposal?

**Rigorous research and compelling insights:**

How have you combined your own firsthand research with a review of existing research and wider trends? How can you show a clear path between your key insights and your proposal? How are your insights grounded in people’s needs and desires? How did you get feedback and incorporate new ideas through prototyping and iterating?

**Systems thinking:**

What’s the bigger picture? How have you considered the root causes of the challenge you’re exploring? How does your idea connect to a wider set of issues? What might be some unintended consequences of your proposal?

**Viability:**

Have you considered potential models for how your proposal could work in the real world? How could it be funded and sustained financially? What are potential barriers? How would you measure success?

**Creativity and innovation:**

How is your idea different from existing interventions? Are there unexpected or surprising elements in your proposal?
Entry Requirements (Briefs 1-7)

Open Briefs

The competition will open for entries via sda.thersa.org, on 25 January 2021, and the final deadline for entries is 10 March 2021 at 4:00pm GMT.

Online Entry

If you are unable to submit online, please contact us by email at sdaenquiries@rsa.org.uk. As you prepare your submission, please ensure that:

• You do NOT include your name, university/college or other identifying marks anywhere on your submission.
• None of your submission files exceed 10 MB – this is the maximum size for each individual file/board when you submit online.

Submission Requirements

For all briefs EXCEPT the Moving Pictures brief, the submission requirements are:

1 x A3 PDF hero image with a 1 sentence description – a singular ‘poster image’ that conveys the essence of your project and includes your project title plus a 1 sentence description. For example: ‘Bare technology: a product and service design proposal to convert old computers (e-waste) into simpler, more straightforward, accessible computers for older people.’ Your hero image should aim to bring your concept to life – make sure it is vibrant and engaging. Your 1 sentence description is very important, make sure you take some time to craft an impactful message.

1 x A3 written summary – a single A3 PDF page that summarises your big idea using the following format:

• Proposal (50 words max). What is your proposed intervention? How will it address the problem?

4 x A3 PDF boards outlining your proposal – 4 pages describing your proposal and responding to the 5 sections of the judging criteria. Number each board in the top right-hand corner, in the order they should be viewed by the judges. You may include relevant hyperlinks in your boards however we cannot guarantee this will be viewed by the panel.

For details on the submission requirements for the Moving Pictures brief, please see the Moving Pictures entry requirements and guidelines. Please note that late submissions will not be accepted, and all entrants are encouraged to submit their work in good time before the deadline.

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Competition Timeline

**26/08/20**
**Briefs Soft Launch**
The 2020-21 RSA Student Design Awards Competition briefs go live on sda.thersa.org

**25/01/21**
**Submissions Open**
Go to sda.thersa.org to submit your proposal

**10/03/21**
**Final Deadline**
Submit by 4pm GMT on 10 March 2021

**28/05/21**
**Winners Announced**
Stay tuned for the big announcement!

**6-15/10/20**
**Online Launch Events**
Sign up to our newsletter to learn about our in-depth brief launch sessions held by our partners and the SDA Team

**10/02/21**
**Early Bird Deadline**
Submit by 4pm GMT on 10 February 2021 for a reduced entry rate of £25

**March-May**
**Judging**
Entries will be evaluated in a two-stage process: shortlisting and interviews

**29/06/21**
**Awards Ceremony**
Join us to celebrate the 2020-21 RSA SDA Winners!