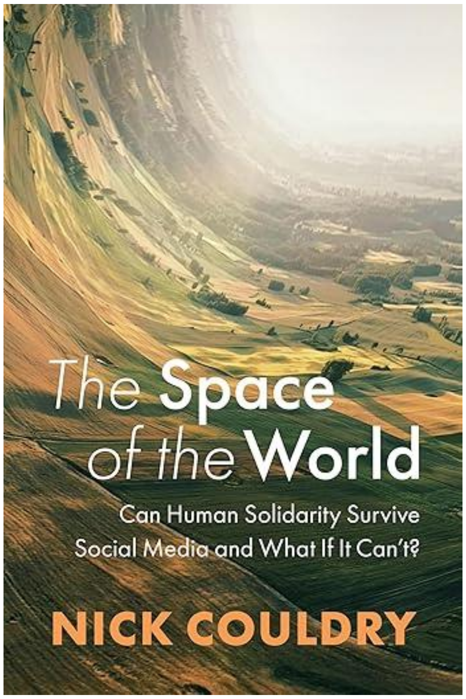
International Journal of Communication 20(2026), Book Review 738–740 1932–8036/2026BKR0009

Nick Couldry, **The Space of the World: Can Human Solidarity Survive Social Media and What If It Can't?,** Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2025, 278 pp., $69.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Terry Flew
The University of Sydney


The Space of the World
Can Human Solidarity Survive Social Media and What If It Can't?
NICK COULDRY

The arrival of any new book by the prolific Nick Couldry is always a welcome sight. With ***The Space of the World: Can Human Solidarity Survive Social Media and What If It Can't?***, Couldry has published the first book of a trilogy titled *Humanizing the Future*. For Couldry, the climate crisis and related questions around inequality and injustice render urgent the question of "how well human beings are placed to organize their lives, collaboratively or not, as the climate crisis will without doubt require" (p. ix). This book focuses on the toxic legacies of continuous digital connection through commercially managed platforms (social media) and whether conducting social life through such platforms is corrosive of the wider human solidarity required to address urgent planetary challenges.

Couldry's core thesis in *The Space of the World* is that:

> Between two and three decades ago, humanity made a huge mistake. The mistake was to delegate to businesses, whose overriding goal is profit and value extraction, the construction and management of the spaces where our social life unfolds. We handed over to business the design of our social world. This is something we should never have done. (p. 3)

Couldry's argument is twofold. First, he argues that digital space has become social space, and that "social media platforms, for many purposes, have *become* our world, and . . . the world where we expect each other to be" (p. 4). Second, Couldry argues that the design of such digital spaces was outsourced to private commercial corporations, so the "space of the world" was designed to optimize sales, attention, traffic, and advertising. Couldry argues that "some tasks, like designing the conditions under which social life can be conducted, are just too important to be left to anyone to design, except perhaps those guided by public, indeed socially negotiated, values" (p. 19).

Couldry recounts 30 years of Internet history in developing his argument. He notes that the development of computing technologies to store information and connect devices coincided with the Clinton Administration's decision to shift digital infrastructure from public to private hands. Internet development was thereby framed by an ideology of market liberalism. The next steps were enabling interconnection so interactions could be traced across multiple devices, and platforms could enable real-time dissemination of content at no cost. The next critical step was the capacity to monetize online interactions by monitoring

Copyright © 2026 (Terry Flew, terry.flew@sydney.edu.au). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at https://ijoc.org.

millions of individuals and on-selling the data to advertisers. The final step was a "non-step": policymakers decided not to regulate social media platforms when adverse consequences became apparent. The outcome: "the technical properties of information space now directly affect the quality of social space" (p. 30).

Couldry argues that while digital connection appeared to offer a politics that would be more open and democratic, it has in fact become highly corrosive to the norms of liberal democratic politics and "strongly negative . . . for the building of solidarity" (p. 51). A digitally networked world imposes a global scale of politics without an equivalent political space for online engagement to translate into meaningful action. Rather than civic spaces for dialogue and deliberatively derived outcomes, there is constant political contestation on digital spaces managed by commercial companies with opaque rules, meaning "the space of the world is fundamentally out of kilter with our inherited models for how politics (and society) can be organized" (p. 64).

With regards to politics, factors like neoliberal ideologies, social inequalities, and alienation from established political institutions are also undermining conventional politics, so the question whether it is social media that is having adverse psychological consequences, particularly for young people, is a subject of sharply divided views and conflicting empirical evidence. Couldry argues that "the idea that there is *no* connection between the largest media trend of the last decade (the universalization of social media use) and other major social trends is . . . implausible" (p. 75).

The question of *how much* social media matters is explored through two case studies. The first concerns the relationship of social media to the decline of trust in social institutions in liberal democracies. Couldry argues that the focus on misinformation and disinformation in academic research and public policy can only go so far in addressing underlying questions of trust, since the colonization of the information space by social media platforms means that "increasingly questions of believability—and indeed doubt—are themselves being decided *within* social media platforms" (p. 107).

The challenge is that "external institutional authority (including journalistic and scientific expertise) has taken years to build and depends . . . on institutional spaces" (p. 107). By contrast, the virality of information on social media is able to gain believability by virtue of its own circulation, relying on "the *apparent* social authority of what 'a lot of people are saying' on digital platforms" (p. 107). While challenges to institutional authority can be positive, there is a "deeper change in the conditions under which trust in quality information is possible at all" (p. 110), and measures to counter online misinformation cannot fully address this.

Couldry's case study is around political polarization. He proposes that there is a need to understand why longstanding phenomena such as political populism acquire such resonance in an age where information flows are dominated by social media platforms. He argues that there is a limit to empirical studies that focus upon the relationship of individuals to particular forms of digital content, such as the "filter bubbles" debate. Couldry instead argues that social media platforms promote and commercialize *affective polarization*. This refers to the extent to which social identities are bound up with belonging to an in-group, which requires for its very structure and existence an "out-group"—a "they" to be countered to a "we" identity—that is not only disagreed with but viewed with hostility and contempt.

The paradox that *The Space of the World* addresses is that, while issues such as climate change necessitate "solidarity that is able to forge new connections across otherwise unbridgeable differences of interest" (p. 137), the technologies that enable unprecedented levels of human connectedness appear to be weakening bonds of solidarity and the possibilities of finding common ground. Couldry recognizes that there is evidence that online connections are promoting new forms of solidarity and political organization. But the difficulty is that, insofar as social media platforms are both corrosive of trust in social institutions and promote political and other forms of identity-based polarization, the extent to which online citizens can think and act collectively is undermined in digital space, not least because it becomes increasingly difficult to adhere to shared facts independently of partisan identities.

Couldry is not arguing for abstention from the Internet or social media, which is increasingly impossible for many people anyway. Instead, he discusses three broad possibilities for change. One is differently designed social media. Given that many of the problems identified by Couldry arise from social media platforms designed to maximize scale and connectivity, one alternative is to design social media platforms that operate on a scale that has resonance with conceivable forms of social scale.

The second possibility is more robust regulation of digital platforms and the power that they can exercise over users, governments, and other businesses. There are many measures being applied in several jurisdictions, including the European Union's Digital Services Act, the UK Online Safety Act, and Australia's Online Safety Act (Social Media Minimum Age) Amendment. The challenge is that "when they act singularly, governments allow Big Tech to pick them off . . . perfectly illustrating the unaccountable social power we have delegated to platforms" (p. 175). At the same time, while international policy coordination is difficult in an era of rising tech nationalisms, it is also necessary to deal with global digital platforms.

Finally, Couldry considers how governments can incubate community-based and noncommercial forms of online activity. He notes that in some parts of the world, nationalizing social media would produce a more oppressive outcome than the current reliance upon commercial platforms, but there is also a desire to put principles of community and collective values at the heart of new social media platform design. A greater congruence between the desire for collaboration and collective decision-making and the principles that inform digital design and infrastructure presents itself as an overarching goal for Couldry. This is difficult to achieve in light of over three decades of digital media colonizing social space based on principles that have worked against such goals, while appearing in the first instance to be the means of realizing them.