

Social Media: Searching for Answers

FOREST OATES



WRITER'S COMMENT: I have thought extensively over the last couple of years about the impacts of social media on American culture. In writing this essay, I chose to briefly examine the role that social media has played in my life and more importantly, how my day-to-day interactions with my Smartphone have influenced my young son. I hope my readers can begin to ask their own questions about the various roles that technology plays in their lives, and in doing so, help others gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be social in both the traditional and virtual sense.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In this, the third of four outstanding feature articles he wrote for UWP 104C (Writing in the Professions: Journalism), Forest Oates tackles a question he had been pondering for some time, one that takes on additional significance as he observes his young son's fascination with the smartphone: will our dependence on smartphones and other social media cause us to lose what it means to be social beings? Forest's thoughtful investigation into both sides of the issue, along with his honest examination of his own experiences, results in a powerful exploration, one that shows a student writer coming into his own as a serious, accomplished journalist.

—Cynthia Bates, University Writing Program

It seems more often than not I am in dispute with my four-year-old son about the time he spends playing game apps on my iPhone. One of his strongest desires during free-time is to have either a tablet or a Smartphone in his hands, while my desire as a parent is to responsibly regulate his interaction with all things tech-related. Whenever my son reaches or exceeds his daily thirty minute iPhone play time, and I take the device from him, he has a miniature break-down. Although such behavior is par for the course given his young age and astounding ability to question authority, something about his emotional attachment to my

phone bothers me. Over the last year, he has gone from learning how to navigate my screen-lock password to being able to enter the iTunes app store, search for apps, and bring them up for a download request. In fact, the only thing preventing him from accruing charges to my iTunes account is his inability to type in my Apple ID – but even that appears to be just around the corner. On one hand, I'm impressed by my son's fascination with – and ability to independently carry out simple tasks on – computers and Smartphones. But then there's the other side of me, the critical side, which asks the question: is my son's growing dependency and interest in technology necessarily a good thing? Furthermore, is my frequent online activity influencing him in a negative way? I have been asking myself these questions for the last year, and my answer is inconclusive – I just don't know.

In today's world, technological advances are being made by the minute, and as a result, our sense of global connectedness is growing right along with it. The iPhone in particular and its Smartphone predecessors are leading the pack in terms of connectivity devices. Not only that, but they also function as the premier social tool for top social-media websites like Facebook and Instagram. But I wonder, as advertising companies promote social connectivity by way of the Smartphone, are they also promoting the often undisclosed techno-escapism that Smartphone usage encourages? More simply stated, is our virtually-perceived connectedness actually a disconnect from reality, and if so, are we (humans) at risk for losing what it means to be a social being in the traditional sense?

The vast majority of Americans are now spending more time online than ever before. This recent spike in internet activity has been facilitated by both the advent of Smartphone technology and social media websites. Some could argue that our culture's fascination with this phenomenon indicates the next socio-evolutionary step for humans. If that's the case, then perhaps our social-media activity reveals a desire to share our lives with the world – a fringe benefit of the internet, so-to-speak. But it could also signal that each advancement in technology increases our desire to avoid reality. In his article, "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?" Stephen Marche argues that "within this world of instant and absolute communication...we suffer from unprecedented alienation." Marche further suggests that, as our world becomes more consumed with innovative forms of socializing, we actually have less and less society. He calls this an "accelerating contradiction: the more connected we

become, the lonelier we are.” With 500 plus friends on Facebook, a person may find it difficult to grasp this concept of loneliness that Marche is talking about. But the final scene in the Oscar nominated movie *The Social Network*, the story of Facebook and its founder Mark Zuckerberg, describes his point exactly. Marche writes that the scene shows a “silent shot of an iconic Zuckerberg sending out a friend request to his ex-girlfriend, then waiting and clicking and waiting and clicking – a moment of superconnected loneliness preserved in amber.” Anyone who has ever logged onto Facebook can relate to being hypnotized by the glaring screen of the newsfeed and a yearning for a “like” or a “comment” or a “response.” I can’t even offer an estimate of all the times I’ve caught myself doing the exact same thing – waiting for validation in the form of an online notification while perusing the Facebook newsfeed. This, I think, is the unspoken truth about social-media usage – that we need online recognition to feel important.

Reflecting on personal experience seems only to confirm this. Although I recently de-activated my Facebook account, I still maintain an active profile on Instagram – a less complicated site without advertisements where users mostly share pictures. Instagram allows users to post photos that followers can either “like” or “comment” on. The action of posting pictures and checking who likes them is incredibly gripping. It’s almost as if each process requires the other to operate. It seems the case, at least for me, that the more followers approve of my picture, the better I feel about myself. This internal approval then gets psychologically categorized according to which aspect of my life I shared. For instance, if I post a picture of my son and me at the park, and I get thirty or more “likes” from followers, I associate positive feelings and emotions with being a parent. It’s this psychological boost from peer approval and social recognition that keeps me posting pictures and incessantly checking my notifications. It’s validation, but I know it’s fake, because these aren’t real people, these are virtual profiles of real people. Furthermore, I know that whether I’m a good father or not has nothing to do with how many likes I get on Instagram, and herein lies the dilemma. Do these “likes” from followers give me a false sense of self, or is it the case that “likes” encourage me to participate in more useful and positive activities? Perhaps a picture of me drinking alcohol that doesn’t receive any “likes” serves as a social cue to do something else with my time, while a picture of my son at the Zoo that receives fifty “likes” encourages me to spend more time with my

family. Perhaps too, my son's experiences with the iPhone are similar to my own. If he's playing an educational game and successfully matches numbers to words, the game's notifications may offer him a sense of achievement – something that's important for a child his age. And each time I critically examine social-media and Smartphone usage in general, I discover a favorable quality that appears to have a minimal – albeit positive – impact on my life.

Although Stephen Marche raises some interesting points in his article, it's important to understand that for every technology fault-finding critic, there is a supporter who holds an opposite view. Cristina Fernandez-Perez, in her article, "I Facebook Therefore I Am," suggests that one of biggest reasons for online social networking activity is the benefit of being able to network with so many people at once. This seems to be the antithesis of loneliness. Similarly, the website *Yuga News* ran an article in March of this year titled "Five Positive Effects of Social Media." At the top of the list was "staying in touch with others." As recently as the early 1990's, if a friend or former classmate moved away, the odds of losing contact with that person were high. Nowadays, with most people on Facebook or Instagram, staying in contact with these people is as simple as clicking an icon on your Smartphone. Not only that, but studies on social media indicate that users with an active online life tend to have an active social life outside the web. So I suppose in the end, using social media and Smartphones is not going to destroy our communicative abilities as humans and leave us all to die a lonely, miserable death in front of a computer screen. But what I do think is that we should individually direct and regulate our own online activities on a case-by-case basis. If I don't want my son's dependency on technology to be too great, I need to set the example by also limiting my online activity. My intent isn't to curb anyone's online social interests, or to tell them how to live their life. My only hope is to encourage others, through my personal experience, to evaluate the reasons and motivations that sometimes go unnoticed when it comes to being social – in the virtual sense.

Works Cited

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