

Editorial

FOR BETTER OR WORSE, WE ARE ALL CONNECTED: CONTEMPLATING THE STARK REALITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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One of the paradoxical factors contributing to the complexity of life in our modern world is the extent to which technology has improved, in theory, to enhance our lives. Specifically, computers have become so powerful, small, and completely interconnected that instantaneous worldwide communication is considered a routine part of daily life. These technologies have developed to such a degree, and become so miniaturized, that they have blurred many boundaries. We carry these devices with us; they can be set to notify us (with a beep or a buzz) for every phone call, text message, or an update from whatever application we so choose. As seems to be a common theme regarding technology, what at first sounds like a good idea (“let us make computers smaller and faster”) can turn out to have unpredictable and detrimental complications. In this editorial, we focus on one aspect of technology: social media; specifically, how it has fundamentally and irrevocably changed our world. In addition, we provide readers with some recommendations on how to accept the presence of social media in our environment while being cognizant of some of its potential pitfalls and dangers.

Until recently, the mission statement of Facebook was simple: “making the world more open and connected.”¹ It sounds wonderful. But, 14 years after its creation, with more than 2.2 billion users, that idealistic mission statement appears somewhat bleaker now that numerous unanticipated consequences have occurred. We address some of them here. First is the issue of data privacy.² This issue has become incredibly important, with Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg recently having testified in front of Congress regarding how safe (or not) our data collected by Facebook really is.³ His idealism and fervor stood in stark contrast to the data breach he was discussing. He shared with the members of Congress how Facebook makes money. It does so through the process of its users sharing their information with the corporation, while Facebook, in return, provides advertisers with access to that information to sell us their products. The advertising is based on user interests, web searches, shopping patterns, and so on. In his testimony, Mr Zuckerberg shared the Facebook business model with members of Congress in a matter-of-fact fashion, although this information appeared to come as a surprise to some in the audience. There were discussions of the “terms of service” agreement that all users sign to become members,

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but it was clear that the length of the document and the terminology used (and the fact that the average user most likely does not even actually read it) precluded most Facebook members from really understanding what they were getting themselves into (and how much of their data they were giving away) when they signed up. The reason we bring this issue up for our readers is to remind you that if you are using such sites, be cognizant that there is a reason why Facebook membership is free to its users; they have a highly successful business model, one that is totally dependent upon end users—willingly or otherwise—sharing a significant amount of personal, highly valuable information with the company.

Two other potential adverse effects of social media include addiction and cyberbullying.^{4,5} As with other forms of addiction, such as addictions to alcohol or gambling, social media can provide that little dose of positive reinforcement every time a “like” or a notification of some sort is received.⁶⁻⁸ Needing these positive reinforcements can add to “fear of missing out” (FOMO), the concern or anxiety that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent.⁹ There even exists a “Facebook addiction scale,”¹⁰ with 6 factors to help determine if the use of the social media site is perhaps excessive: (1) spending a lot of time thinking about and planning to use Facebook, (2) feeling an urge to use Facebook more and more, (3) using Facebook to forget about personal problems, (4) trying to cut down on Facebook use without success, (5) becoming restless or troubled if unable to use Facebook, and (6) using Facebook so much that it is affecting your work. Recommendations for helping with this kind of addiction include keeping a journal of how much time is really being spent on Facebook; it is unclear if quitting “cold turkey” is the best way to help alleviate the problem.

Another potentially serious complication of social media, cyberbullying, is important for us to

keep in mind as parents or caregivers of children. The government website stopbullying.gov describes the warning signs that a child may be cyberbullied: (1) an increase or decrease in device use, (2) exhibiting emotional responses to what is happening on the devices, (3) hiding his or her screen and avoiding discussion, (4) shutting down old and creating new social media accounts, (5) avoiding social situations, and (6) becoming withdrawn or depressed. In terms of what can be done to help alleviate the issue of cyberbullying, this site recommends the following: (1) notice if there are any changes in behavior or mood and try to explore why; (2) talk to the child to determine what is happening and who might be involved; (3) document with screenshots of the bullying and keep a record of what is happening; (4) report the events to the social media site, the school, and, if there is a concern for threats or illegal activity, the police; and (5) provide support for the bullied child and determine if professional support may be needed. Although this kind of structured approach appears to be of value,¹¹ it is important to remember that bullying of any kind can be insidious, difficult to manage, and can cause long-term complications for the target of the behavior.

Although not specific to children, one of the putative causes of cyberbullying can be seen on Twitter (another popular social media site/application): the anonymous nature of the software. It is extremely common to see vicious attacks against any routine news post by one side or the other, particularly if the piece has some political component. Users routinely hide behind their anonymity to create caustic divisive arguments using words that they would be much more reticent to use in real life during a face-to-face conversation. We find it highly ironic that these social media sites, created initially to bring the world closer together, have become profound, powerful, and incisive tools for divisiveness and hate.

Our last point concerns cyberattacks via social media. Sites and applications such as Facebook and Twitter have become a major source of news for many people. Unfortunately, given how these sites are structured, it is often unclear what the exact source is for some of this news and other information. It is certainly beyond the scope of this editorial to attempt to grapple with the international

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challenge of cyberattacks and the potential for weaponizing misinformation via social media, other than to recommend to our readers that they use a healthy dose of caution and skepticism if they are obtaining a significant portion of their news via social media sites.

Conclusion

In this editorial, we have touched on the topic of social media and how pervasive it has become in the landscape of our lives. Some readers may never have taken part in any of this new technology simply owing to lack of knowledge or interest; others may have actively chosen not to participate because of fears of the potential downside of getting involved. We would take a somewhat more middle-of-the road approach. We feel that if our audience is educated on the topic, they are most likely to glean some of the benefits of social media (as it was originally intended) while minimizing the likelihood of being stung by some of the downsides. Our final recommendations are 3-fold regarding these powerful online technologies: (1) think carefully before posting to one of these sites/applications; (2) think even more carefully before responding to someone else's post; and (3) if you do get involved with social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, it is important to take conscious and meaningful breaks from them: as an example, periodically having real-life, face-to-face, genuine conversations to remind yourself, and your actual friends, what truly meaningful social connections are all about.

The statements and opinions contained in this editorial are solely those of the coeditors in chief.

FINANCIAL DISCLOSURES

None reported.

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