

Taking the “Social” out of “Social Media”: How technological advancement and the Internet Age have affected our ability to truly connect.

Abstract

With iconic social networking sites like Facebook now a ubiquitous and arguably integral part of daily life, it is crucial to understand the cultural impact of social media and the techno-baggage that comes with it. In the race to expand their user empires, social media companies have gradually offered more and more facets to their respective sites and apps. Sharing media and messages is easier than ever, but has this enhanced the eponymous function of social networking, or undermined it? In a world with a seemingly endless supply of reaction gifs, memes and viral videos, the sharing that really matters has just become part of the noise.

The numbers behind Social Media and the people behind the numbers

To better understand the context of the situation, it is helpful to look at some of the statistics behind the user base of social media sites. Chaffey (2008) has compiled in article from Smart Insights, a marketing consultancy with international reach, some of the latest statistics in this area for 2018. Of the over 4 billion internet users globally, almost 3.2 billion are active users of social media. It is no surprise that Facebook and its subsidiaries dominate the market, with over 2 billion active users. YouTube, Google’s flagship video sharing product, follows with one and a half billion active users. To anyone with an internet connection these numbers seem almost obvious in their heft; where is the impact? The full effect of these gargantuan numbers lies with the generation of media and the extent to which it is shared.

Looking at YouTube for example, between 100 and 500 hours of video content are uploaded every minute. The exact number is hard to pinpoint given the dynamic nature of the virtual environment, but even with the conservative lower limit that amounts to significant amount of generated content. Looking at Facebook, every minute there are almost a million posts, be they photos, status updates or comments. Instagram is no less impressive with over 95 million posts of photos and videos every day. This all amounts to a sea of digital noise with which users are flooded with every day thanks to promotional and sponsored posts.

Initially it would seem that social networking served its purpose, (Collin, Rahilly, Richardson & Third, 2011, p.3), with the younger generation using these sites to connect with each other and the world around them. By its very nature, however, social media is an opportunity to escape the daily burdens of the tangible world. And part of that tangible world is social interaction. While Huberman (2009) and Jeffrey (2008, p. 5) busied with the description of social media as a networking tool with the ability to connect friends and families with a semblance of virtual intimacy, the generation that followed took that connection to a different place.

The largest age demographic in users of social media are 16-34 year olds (Global Web Index 2014 Q4), the bulk of which are more commonly known as millennials. According to a popular study by Twenge *et al.* (2014) this particular generation is known for increasing cynicism and a general distaste for the state of the world. It comes as no surprise then that the millennial generation would turn to the online world for a reprieve which is evidenced by the previous statistics. But are they doing so to connect with their friends and families? Not necessarily, according to a slightly earlier study by Twenge (2014), the impact of heavy social media usage on millennials did not have an optimistic outlook. Social media was found to be potentially quite detrimental, replacing genuine, in-person friendships with online “friends” (noting the use of the quotation marks), replacing empathy with a heightened narcissism, and replacing the taking of action in the physical world with “slacktivism” Bailyn, E. (2012, March 19). The differences between slacktivism and activism: How ‘Kony 2012’ is narrowing the gap.

In spite of most social media company origins, the problem is certainly not americentric with Australians forming a heavy user base of their own (Collin et al., 2011, p.10). According to Cowling (2018) social media statistics Australia, both Facebook and YouTube shared approximately 15 million Australian users. The lion's share is again those that fall in the category of "millennial", and looking at the Deloitte 2017 survey, this generation of Australians is just as cynical and just as prone to seeking out the irony of disconnect that social media can afford.

The Race up Technology Mountain: The Hindrance That Progress Provides

While technological advances are usually touted as contributing positively to problems, in this case they may be exacerbating the issue at hand. This is on several fronts, from the development and evolution of the sites and respective apps themselves, to that of the hardware they are available on.

From a software perspective, the various social media platforms, while progressively expanding their repertoire have encroached on each other's provided products almost to a level of redundancy. It is pertinent to hereby introduce two further social media platforms: Twitter and Snapchat. While lacking the giant user base of the other platforms, these two each still boast a significant number of users with total of 500 million users between them (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/545967/snapchat-app-dau/> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/>). So just how different are the services provided by each of these different sites?

The original answer to this would have been "very". In their initial stages, the different social media platforms provided their own form of media sharing. For example, users of Twitter required creativity to express their thoughts in a 140 character limited "tweet". Instagram began as a simple picture sharing site, while YouTube held domain over video sharing. Facebook was a social networking website, allowing users to create a profile

page, make friends, and share various format media. The inception of Snapchat allowed users to “single-use” share photos with limited duration. These initial lines, in the natural course of development and user needs, have blurred almost completely.

Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat now boast a “story” option in which a series of photos are shared for a limited duration. Instagram allows a similar direct messaging option to that of Snapchat. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter now share the use of hashtags to categorise their content, and along with Snapchat allow the tagging of other users in posts and photos. Instagram and Twitter share the ability to “Explore” and search by hashtags. It can be argued that the additional video sharing capabilities of these other platforms and the push toward shorter content is the source of 20% of users clicking away from a YouTube video within the first 10 seconds.

The issue here is that there are now a host of platforms that are redundant in what they provide yet addictive in their use. Hofmann, Vohs & Baumeister (2012) and Penenberg (2018). This, in conjunction with a need to “be heard” leads to either a multitude of shared, impersonal posts from other sources, or genuine thoughts and posts that are simply lost in the sheer volume of noise. The final result is a widening of the valley of disconnect between the user and sincere interaction with people, be it online or in the outside world.

This is again exacerbated with advances in the hardware behind social media access. Smart accessories are becoming ubiquitous, with smart phones and smart watches forming a 500 billion (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/237505/global-revenue-from-smartphones-since-2008/>) and 6 billion dollar industry (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/302482/wearable-device-market-value/>). Where dwelling outside once hindered the use of internet and social media services that obstacle is no more. A user can not only be connected but can share every from of content effectively every single moment of their day. The image of a commuter engrossed in their phone and blind to the world around them is common enough to understand how this has only deepened the divide between the social self and the other.

It Can Be Helped, and It Can Help

Fortunately, it is not necessarily the fact that the outlook of social media and its impact on social connection be so dire. Poorly though it is used currently, social media has been a powerful tool for communication, connection and change.

Collin *et al.* (2011) demonstrated an extensive range of benefits associated with the use of social media platforms. Beneficial outcomes for Australian youth were correlated with the use of these platforms, ranging from the improvement of computer and technology literacy, to the establishment of social relationships and communication skills, to boosts in creativity and self-expression.

In 2011, social media provided the fuel that pushed the uprising in the Middle East known as the Arab Spring (Marzouki, Skandrani-Marzouki, Béjaoui, Hammoudi, & Bellaj. (2012). The contribution of Facebook to the 2011 Tunisian revolution. (Marzouki et al. 2012, p.15)

social movement was coordinated by youths in countries suffering long-lived dictatorships, who managed to use social media to their distinct advantage. Other instances where social media has complemented social change are the 15-M Movement in Spain, the Grape Revolution (also known as the Twitter Revolution) in Moldova,

In the same year as the Arab Spring, and while it did raise the initial concerns of the rising “slacktivism”, the viral video calling for the end to the war criminal Joseph Kony’s crimes did indeed raise awareness of the situation in Uganda. Recently, similar and more powerful use of social media has led to the “#MeToo” and “#BlackLivesMatter” movements.

Social media has pervaded all aspects of daily life, and while trying so hard to fulfill its role as a networking tool has achieved equal if not more tread in the opposite direction. Rather enhance already strong social connections in the real world, it has replaced them

almost entirely with a digital community that constitutes the vast majority of the world's population. The sheer volume of the generation and sharing of content, and the evolution of the technology in that pursuit has ironically created a void of noise in which to contribute but rarely if ever to a significant reception. Evidence exists that the opposite effect is not only possible, but that social media has the potential to complement social interaction, to ease social organisation and the organisation of social movements. What lies in the path of achieving that is, paradoxically perhaps, its own success.

References:

- Bailyn E. (2012). The Difference Between Slacktivism And Activism: How ‘Kony 2012’ Is Narrowing The Gap. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/evan-bailyn/kony-2012-activism_b_1361791.html
- Chaffey D. (2018). Global social media research summary 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strategy/new-global-social-media-research/>
- Collin, P., Richardson, I., & Third, A. (2011). The benefits of social networking services. Cooperative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing. Retrieved from <http://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/The-Benefits-of-Social-NetworkingServices.pdf>
- Cowling d. (2018). Social Media Statistics Australia – February 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.socialmedianews.com.au/social-media-statistics-australia-february-2018/>
- Jeffrey Boase (2008). Personal networks and the personal communication system. *Information, Communication & society*.11:4, 490-508, DOI:10.1080/1369118080199900110
- <https://www.globalwebindex.com/>
- Hofmann, W., Vohs, K. D., & Baumeister, R. F. (2012). What people desire, feel conflicted about, and try to resist in everyday life. *Psychological science*, 23(6), 582-588. DOI: 10.1177/0956797612437426
- Huberman, B. A., Romero, D. M., & Wu, F. (2009). Social Networks that Matter: Twitter under the Microscope. *First Monday*. Volume 14:1. <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2317/2063>
- Marzouki, Y., Skandrani-Marzouki, I., Béjaoui, M., Hammoudi, H., & Bellaj, T. (2012). The contribution of Facebook to the 2011 Tunisian revolution: A cyberpsychological insight. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(5), 237-244.

Penenberg A. (2018). Social Networking Affects Brains Like Falling in Love. Retrieved from <https://www.fastcompany.com/1659062/social-networking-affects-brains-falling-love>

Statista. (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/545967/snapchat-app-dau/>

The 2017 Deloitte Millennial Survey. (2017). Retrieved from <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/gx-deloitte-millennial-survey-2017-executive-summary.pdf>

Twenge, J. M., Campbell, W. K., & Carter, N. T. (2014). Declines in trust in others and confidence in institutions among American adults and late adolescents, 1972–2012. *Psychological Science*, 25(10). DOI: 10.1177/0956797614545133