Social Media: Friend or Foe?

The other day, my friend and I went out for lunch. I looked down to put my napkin on my lap and heard her saying something. I didn’t quite hear her, so I asked her to repeat it. Her reply, “Oh sorry, I was talking to Siri.” If you don’t know, Siri is the voice of the virtual iPhone assistant. You can ask Siri questions and “she” will answer using information from the Internet. Apparently, now you can ask Siri to update your Facebook status, which is what my friend was doing. Was it wrong of me to feel a little annoyed that my friend was talking to her phone instead of me? Now, I know that social media and all the technology that comes with it is everywhere lately, but I wasn’t expecting Siri to be joining us for lunch!

I have to admit, it is ironic that I—a blogger who uses social media for a living—am complaining about “technology these days” like my grandfather does. But I argue that I’m actually the perfect person to speak out against what’s wrong with how we use social media—to make sure what’s wonderful about it remains that way. I have a stake in this endeavor! But first, a little background information.

Connecting the world

One of the first social networks, MySpace, was founded in 2003. In less than ten years, social media has become part of many people’s everyday lives. It’s truly the first tool that connects the entire world. True social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ are meant for chatting with your friends and sharing photos and news. Sites like Foursquare allow people to “check in” to different places to let their network know where they are. At the dentist? Picking up some coffee? Just click a button on your smartphone and your friends will know what you’re doing. (My question is, does the world really need to know every time you stop to pick up your dry cleaning?) There are hundreds
of social networking sites: professional, hobby, photo sharing, video sharing, and gaming sites. Not to mention blog sites, like this one. No matter what your interest, there's a social media site that covers it.

Who uses all these websites? There are about 130 million social media users in the United States. That's more people using social media in this country than the number of people in the country of Japan!(1) Facebook users spend an average of more than fifteen hours each month on the site.(2) That's about thirty minutes per day. I'm almost certain that thirty minutes is coming out of our time with our friends and families. Either that or we're stealing time from when we probably should be studying or working. The truth is, while there are some wonderful things about social media, it can often be a source of distraction rather than connection. I also argue that it can be detrimental to quality journalism. Furthermore, it can actually be dangerous when used improperly.

**Are we connected or distracted?**

I'll give one thing to social media: it's fun, pure and simple. We love to connect with each other about experiences, laugh at silly videos, and share news. Getting online to chat with a friend is easy. We can socialize on our own terms when it's most convenient for us. But let's think about that for a moment. What if a friend needed you at a time that wasn't convenient for you? Would you turn them away, not answer the phone or come to the door, simply because the timing was wrong? I imagine that some people are so used to connecting online that they get out of the habit of talking in person. Could social media actually be making us less social?

Another good thing about social media is that keeping in touch with friends has never been easier. Even people who move away can stay connected to their hometown friends and family by sharing pictures and stories about their lives and enjoying the same information from their friends. Social media also allows people to share their creativity by posting ideas, art, and music on blogs and podcasts. Expanding our social networks, either virtually or in real life, can also be a way to increase our understanding of other people, especially those from backgrounds different than our own. Learning more about others creates respect and tolerance, which can grow into compassion and acceptance.

Social media can help people who are shy or have special needs learn how to communicate better. Kyle, who has been diagnosed with developmental disorders, says that using social media helped him ease into having conversations in person. “Two to three years ago I wasn’t able to talk to people face-to-face. Like, this right now, I wouldn’t have been able to explain anything. I would have been all shy...” Kyle was introduced to MySpace and Facebook as a teenager, and he says
practicing talking with others online helped him learn to make friends and have conversations. “It’s basically just the fact that you don’t have to have a person staring back at you with what you’re saying,” he explains. (3)

While all of that is good, I contend that connecting online takes time away from real-life relationships. And there are facts to prove it. In a recent survey, thirty-nine percent of people said they spent more time socializing online than in person and twenty percent said they prefer texting or talking online than meeting face-to-face. (4) In another survey, twenty-four percent said they missed important moments because they were busy trying to share those moments on their social network. (5) It seems to me like many of us are missing real life while we’re sharing it with our virtual life.

The end of journalism?
Many people use social media as a way to get news. Over half of all Americans have learned about a breaking news story using social media. (5) News that comes out on social media is often instant and occurs as the story is unfolding. Protesters in Cairo, Egypt, during the Arab Spring in 2011 sent tweets—messages sent over Twitter—that gave real-time, first-person coverage of the revolution. Social media became a very important organizing tool, allowing leaders to broadcast information to their followers and encouraging others to join the protest. At the same time, people all over the world were able to read about, and see photos of, the uprising as it happened. In this demonstration and in many other cases, people with cameras on their cell phones are able to go into places and take photos of things that television cameras cannot. The problem with all this access and immediacy is that many people “reporting” using social media aren’t trained journalists, so it’s easy to miss facts and report inaccurate information. In fact, 49 percent of Americans have heard breaking news from social media that turned out to be false. (5) Also, because people are turning away from traditional news sources like newspapers and television, those sources have experienced a major decline in recent years. News directors don’t have the budgets to spend on high-quality reporters who seek to uncover actual news stories. Some have even said that social media is bringing about the end of real journalism.

Could it even be dangerous?
Thinking about safety risks are probably not on the top of the list when people get online to connect, but the truth is, dangers exist. Using social media while driving is a widespread and dangerous problem. It contributes to many distractions while driving, such as texting, watching videos, checking social media sites, even playing games online. In 2011, 1.3 million car crashes involved cell phones, and 3,331 people were killed in crashes involving a distracted driver. (6) Using social media to bully others, called “cyber bullying,” is
another common risk that can be extremely harmful. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), over fifteen percent of six- to eleven-year-olds have reported being cyber-bullied. It’s often used to spread rumors and other hurtful information about the victim. It can lead to anxiety, depression, and even suicide. “Sexting,” which is texting, emailing, or uploading explicit photos or language to social media sites is also dangerous. In the AAP survey, twenty percent of teen respondents said that they have taken part in sexting images of themselves. In some states, receiving these types of images from a minor can lead to felony child pornography charges. How can we change the culture around us so that people use these tools responsibly? What is upsetting to me is that no matter what the technology, people will always find a way to abuse it.

**Put technology to work for you.**

One of the main reasons I decided to start my blog was to help people understand that technology can help us in many ways, but only if we use it the right way and make it work for us. It’s up to each of us to be aware of the correct ways to use social media and avoid the things that can make it harmful. This thought from Dr. Michael Rich, Director of the Center on Media and Child Health at Children’s Hospital Boston sums it up, “We should not view social media as either positive or negative, but as essentially neutral. It’s what we do with the tools that decides how they affect us and those around us.” So how do you make social media a tool to help you connect rather than distract you from your real-world relationships? Consider turning off your mobile devices and spending quality time with the people you care about. Here’s an idea: make a game out of ignoring your phones the next time you have lunch with friends. Leave your phones on, but stack them on the table together. The phones will ring and the reminders will sound. Siri may remind you that it’s time for your next meeting. But be brave—leave them in the stack! The first person that checks his or her phone has to pay for everyone’s meal. That ought to give each of you an incentive to connect in person!

**References**

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4. **Bennett, Shea.** Is Social Media Making Us Antisocial? All Twitter, 15 June 2012.


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