



## **Social Media**

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## Social Media

In the old days, if you liked Guyanan postage stamps of the 1850s, you tried to find someone in your town who was also interested in the same thing so that you could share resources and tips. Of course, even if your town had 3 million residents, it was unlikely that anyone else there shared your—err—unusual interest. So you looked for magazines to subscribe to. Again, nothing. So you wrote to companies that dealt in postage stamps and asked if they had any special deals on the 1853 Inverted Jungle Commemorative First-Day Cover, and when they stopped laughing, they wrote back and said no.

Today it's different. You go on the web, and you Google it. Pretty high on the list will be the Facebook group where the 17 people worldwide with your interest can actually find one another. Just like that.

Social media are a big hit. It took 38 years for the installed base of telephones to reach 10 million; cable TV, 25 years; fax machines, 22 years; VCRs, 9 years; computers, 7 years; web browsers, 10 months.<sup>1</sup> Social media have only accelerated this pattern: Facebook took 852 days; Twitter, 780 days; and Google+, 16 days.<sup>2</sup> This kind of accelerated growth doesn't happen to products nobody cares about.

As we might expect, people—especially young people—are spending significant and growing amounts of time on social media. US Facebook users spent an average of 6.3 hours per month on the site in May 2011 and account for 73% of all US internet users.<sup>3</sup> Social networking accounts for 1 of every 6 minutes spent online in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Pastor/blogger Tim Challies writes, “Four years ago most of us did not use Facebook at all. And today we are using it compulsively. A recent study of media habits found that about 1/3 of women between 18 and 34 check Facebook before they even go to the bath-

room in the morning; 21% check it in the middle of the night; half of them admit that they are addicted to it.”<sup>5</sup>

We ought to pay attention to significant things. The social-media phenomenon is a significant thing. What are its effects, for good or for evil? How can we use it? How should we adjust our tactics when teaching the Facebook generation?

### Effects of Social Media Use

There are a great many complications that use of social media adds to the user's life. There are considerations of privacy violation and identity theft, of course; these issues get a lot of attention in the media. But we need to consider other matters as well, matters that will affect the ways we deal with our students and the needs they bring into the classroom.

### Time Management

The rise of social media has obviously changed things in our student population. The most obvious change is the amount of time our students are spending interacting with one another. And while much of that time is spent multitasking—they are allegedly studying while they respond to status updates as they arrive—the fact is that they are dedicating a sizable chunk of their lives to the media. One blogger notes, “Social media can give you great ideas, and it can also take away the time and focused attention you need to make them a reality.”<sup>6</sup>

This predicament presents a useful teaching opportunity. Part of Christ-like character—the goal of Christian education—is recognizing and implementing proper priorities in all areas of life, including the stewardship of time. The amount of time we give to any activity should be proportionate to the effect it will have on our accomplishing our mission: to grow in Christ-likeness and to serve His body, the church. For this activity and any other, we need to prioritize it thoughtfully against that criterion. Do social media increase our opportunities

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.powershow.com/view/9b27-ZmNlN/H\\_John\\_Heinz\\_III\\_School\\_of\\_Public\\_Policy\\_and\\_Management\\_Carnegie\\_Mellon\\_flash\\_ppt\\_presentation](http://www.powershow.com/view/9b27-ZmNlN/H_John_Heinz_III_School_of_Public_Policy_and_Management_Carnegie_Mellon_flash_ppt_presentation).

<sup>2</sup><https://plus.google.com/112418301618963883780/posts/D2Rz5rdciWE#112418301618963883780/posts/D2Rz5rdciWE>. Google+ got the next 10 million in only 8 days. <https://plus.google.com/112418301618963883780/posts/B3s3dd739bG#112418301618963883780/posts/B3s3dd739bG>.

<sup>3</sup>[http://blog.comscore.com/2011/06/facebook\\_linkedin\\_twitter\\_tumblr.html](http://blog.comscore.com/2011/06/facebook_linkedin_twitter_tumblr.html).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>“700 billion minutes,” November 22, 2010. <http://www.challies.com/technology/700-billion-minutes>.

<sup>6</sup>Brett Borders, “The Dangers of Social Media Imbalance,” January 25, 2010. <http://copybrighter.com/the-dangers-of-social-media-imbalance>.

to interact with people? to meet new people? to pursue conversations with people more frequently than we otherwise could? Yes? Then these are good, important things, and we should allot proper time to accomplish those goals. As a teacher, I find that Facebook is a very helpful tool for staying in touch with my students and getting inside their heads. Ironically, they tell the whole world things that they won't tell me in the classroom. A reasonable amount of time on Facebook helps me know my students better, and that makes me a better teacher. It's worth some time.

But addiction is time management gone crazy—or just gone. We all need to learn to balance the amount of time we invest in the various areas of our lives, again based on the degree to which they contribute to the goal. Interacting with people is a good thing, but there are other good things too, and if we spend 75% of our time reading trivial status updates, we're not being good stewards of a limited resource. Students should be challenged to make informed decisions about how they'll allot their time and to stick to those decisions.

## Real Relationships

We don't have just one kind of friend. Students of social theory have observed that we have a very few intimate friends, a few more close friends, and a much larger circle of acquaintances. As ambassadors for Christ, we should seek to move beyond the routine acquaintance stage; we should develop relationships with people to the point where we can demonstrate Christ's grace to those who are unbelievers and can edify substantially those who are believers. That requires conversations longer than tweets. Typically it also requires times of looking one another in the face, of communicating with the full range of nonverbals—tone of voice, facial expression, body language—which are not available in written communication.

One of the dangers of social media—and this is not inherent to them, but a common side effect—is the maintaining of lots and lots of shallow acquaintances. Judith Donath, associate professor at MIT Media Lab, writes, “Our traditional notion of friendship embraces trust, support, compatible values, etc. On social network sites, a ‘friend’ may simply be someone on whose link you have clicked.”<sup>7</sup> Facebook users will occasionally do a

“friend purge,” going through their friend lists and “defriending” people they barely know. That may or may not be a good idea in every case, but it demonstrates our inherent need for meaningful, not just casual, relationships. Andrew McCulloch, head of Britain's Mental Health Foundation, commented, “Social interaction online should not usually replace an offline social life.”<sup>8</sup>

We've all seen situations where groups of people are all texting or talking on their cell phones. They're not talking to one another; their “groupness” is meaningless, and they're each communicating with somebody somewhere else. Many of us react to such a situation with a terse “Hang up, and talk to the people you're actually with!” One blogger asks, “Does the social web, in fact, make us antisocial? Have we forgotten how to be ‘in the moment’ when we're sitting with a group of friends? Have we forgotten how to be ‘present’?”<sup>9</sup> Even as we can use technology to broaden the reach of our relationships—and that's a very good thing—we need to maintain the personal, face-to-face intimacy of a few trusted friends, friends who can look us in the eye and perceive needs that we would never post and who can confront us in ways that are not appropriate for a public forum.

## Groupthink

Yale psychologist Irving Janis defined groupthink as “a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive ingroup, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.”<sup>10</sup> The Bible has much to say about the importance of our relationships to our thinking and decision making (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:33).

Adolescents are notoriously driven by peer pressure. If the use of social media increases the user's desire to please his friends and to accommodate their weaknesses simply because they are his friends—and it doesn't have to do that—then it needs to be

<http://www.freakonomics.com/2008/02/15/is-myspace-good-for-society-a-freakonomics-quorum/>.

<sup>8</sup> “‘Internet addiction’ linked to depression, says study,” BBC News, February 3, 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/8493149.stm>.

<sup>9</sup> Gemma Went, “There's a Time and a Place for the Social Web,” November 12, 2010. <http://www.thesocialweb.co.uk/2010/11/theres-time-and-place-for-social-web.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Victims of Groupthink (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen J. Dubner, “Is MySpace Good for Society? A Freakonomics Quorum,” February 15, 2008.

controlled. We need to be people who will stand for the right regardless of the social pressure to do otherwise. (And because the world is organized in opposition to God [1 John 2:15–16], there will be that social pressure.) To the extent that social networks can elicit in us an unbalanced view of the importance of consensus, they should be treated with care.

## Meditation

We all need to think more than we react. Research demonstrates that the kind of “fast-twitch” thinking that web use encourages can militate against our careful reasoning our way to a wise decision.<sup>11</sup> A life spent reacting to a stream of status updates is not a contemplative one, and thus it is not a wise one. Social media have their place, but they cannot be the basis of a considered philosophy or a worldview.

## Triviality

We’ve all noticed what CNN’s Brandon Griggs calls the “Let-Me-Tell-You-Every-Detail-of-My-Day Bore.”<sup>12</sup> Facebook status updates will tell me anything any of my friends’ posts anywhere within Facebook and any time anyone else “likes” or comments on any of those posts. It will also tell me every time any of my friends becomes a friend of someone else, every time he plays a game, every time he adds an app. Is there really any reason I should see every one of those factoids? Besides the issue of time management noted above, constant exposure to a stream of such trivia has to alter our perception of what’s important and what isn’t. I suspect that it has an effect similar to that of being a journalist in the entertainment business—we begin to think of the trivial as significant and the significant as trivial.

The Scripture, on the other hand, calls us to devote our lives to the eternally significant, the “eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17), to “look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal”

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the ways that internet use physically alters the way our brains work, see <http://www.bjupress.com/pdfs/ed-issues-whitepapers/kids-these-days.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> “The 12 most annoying types of Facebookers,” August 20, 2009. [http://articles.cnn.com/2009-08-20/tech/annoying\\_facebook.updaters\\_1\\_facebook-users-friend-online-social-networks?\\_s=PM:TECH](http://articles.cnn.com/2009-08-20/tech/annoying_facebook.updaters_1_facebook-users-friend-online-social-networks?_s=PM:TECH).

(v. 18). In order for that to happen, we need to “prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21); to “walk as children of light, . . . proving what is acceptable unto the Lord[,] . . . walk[ing] circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:8, 10, 15–16). Biblical discernment, which will drive our spiritual growth and thus our spiritual success, will not flourish if we spend our time with trivia.

## Depression

A Leeds university study recently noted a link between internet addiction and depression.<sup>13</sup> Christians will note that the preceding factors will produce the kind of mind and lifestyle that will fall far short of reflecting the image of God. And since that reflection is the very reason we exist, failing in it will result in the kind of rootlessness and frustration that will often lead to depression. The solution begins, of course, with regeneration. But for those who are God’s people, we will find fulfillment as we pursue His person, His will, and His glory.

We can do that on social networks. But this arena, like all others, requires discernment and discipline.

## What to Do? What to Do?

As teachers, we need to take our students from where they are to where they need to be. We need to understand the world our students are growing up in; show them how to leverage its strengths; warn them about its dangers and equip them to deal with them; and always keep before them the Prime Directive, manifesting the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31) by declaring the gospel (Mark 16:15), winning the lost, and discipling the brethren (Matt. 28:19–20).

It’s a big task, but God has promised His presence (Matt. 28:20), His strength (2 Cor. 12:9), and certain success (Phil. 4:13). Given all that, we can do it.

What can we do to deal specifically with the issues that social media raise?

First, we can model and teach proper time management and prioritization. In many cases we can work it right into the assignment structure—and

<sup>13</sup> “Excessive internet use is linked to depression,” University of Leeds press release, February 3, 2010. [http://www.leeds.ac.uk/news/article/707/excessive\\_internet\\_use\\_is\\_linked\\_to\\_depression](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/news/article/707/excessive_internet_use_is_linked_to_depression). The study itself is here: <http://content.karger.com/produktedb/produkte.asp?doi=277001>.

for younger students we'll have to. We can require that students read an assignment, for example, without taking Facebook breaks. (In one of my courses I require that students read a series of assignments in one sitting each; they don't get credit for doing the assignment if they interrupt their concentration.) We can urge them to finish their homework for the night before they start multitasking so that they learn how to concentrate and in the process give what they're reading a decent chance to make it from short-term memory to long-term.

Second, we can provide social opportunities in the church and school that encourage face-to-face relationships, build group unity, and strengthen skills in communicating and working together. (Mission trips, especially to developing areas [no cell signal, no wireless], are great for that.) We can use leadership development programs to develop in peer leaders the ability to influence their classmates through the relationships that they build among themselves.

Third, we can balance our teaching of social skills (e.g., group projects) with opportunities for students to perform individually. We can encourage them to air policy disagreements graciously but clearly and with supporting arguments. We can value and reinforce individualism. Paul nicely illustrates this concept with his discussion of spiritual gifts in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. The body is one and must operate as one—in fact, it must get more unified over time. But the members differ from one another, and that difference is at the heart of what makes the body successful. We even speak of someone as being “all thumbs” or having “two left feet,” a condition that none of us envy. Different

skill sets on a team make the team more flexible and thus more successful. We really can celebrate diversity.<sup>14</sup>

Fourth, we can assign work that requires deep thought, something that will not be able to be done well while surfing on the side with the television going in the background.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, we can hold up before the students the privilege of our calling as believers, the glory of the gospel, and the certainty of God's provision for our success in His service. Many years ago, in an address to students at Princeton Seminary, the great B.B. Warfield said, “Keep always before your mind the greatness of your calling, that is to say, these two things: the immensity of the task before you, [and] the infinitude of the resources at your disposal.” This is the great antidote to distraction, to pride, to failure, to depression. People who see as God sees value His values and seek His will. They will not be easily enticed by the trivial and temporal.

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<sup>14</sup> For a further discussion of this concept, see “Cultural Diversity in the Christian Classroom,” *Teacher to Teacher*, March 2008. <http://www.print-e-pro.net/freepport/604/T2T/March08/>.

<sup>15</sup> For more on this, see <http://www.bjupress.com/pdfs/ed-issues-whitepapers/kids-these-days.pdf>.