Social Media

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<div align="center">**Social Media**</div>

Introduction

No matter the view taken of it, it is inescapable that social media today is a global presence of virtually inestimable proportions. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, and other sites attract millions of subscribers who post and present themselves as interactive, online identities, and who eagerly engage in extending their social media networks. Moreover, the reality of the relative newness of the capabilities creates an exponential effect; so many become users daily, it is at best difficult to assess just how the media exists in daily living. All that may be safely asserted is that the impact is vast and growing; as of 2013, over 4.2 billion people globally access social media through their mobile devices (socialmediatoday, 2013). For better or worse, social media is profoundly changing the concept of "social" itself, creating expanding arenas of virtual connection.

This component of presence then amplifies ideas regarding the actual effects of the impact. For many, social media is an unprecedented and unlimited opportunity to interact, form and enjoy new relationships, establish important business connections, gain information, and generally maintain a satisfying online identity. For others, and even those motivated by and engaged in the same processes, it is a murky and sometimes harmful terrain. They note that duplicity and bullying are enabled by the media, as well as personal representations created solely to extort or exploit. Then, there is the critical issue of privacy, as subscribers are made aware that the personal data they provide to the sites is employed for commercial purposes. Still others decry social media as inescapably

lessening real human contact, and as a wholly inadequate substitution for it. It is likely

that debate will continue, as it is probable social media will continue as an immensely

popular focus. Nonetheless, one thing is certain: as social media remains so strong a

force in cultures globally, it is changing the ways people regard – and conduct – their

social lives.

Positive Effects: Commerce and Education

It is interesting that supporters of social media increasingly emphasize an aspect

of it by no means necessarily "social"; that is, it enables and encourages a wide range of

commercial and educational efforts, and part from providing network connectivity in

terms of furthering personal ambitions. It is noted, for example, that corporations are

turning to social media as a means of training employees and fostering innovation in

business strategies. If, in the earlier days of social media, it was perceived as a

distraction in business settings, modern employers are now promoting it as a means of

developing unique worker presences. The media allows the worker to create an online

identity and, when this is encouraged to reflect professionalism, the employer is obliquely

enhanced. Then: "Social media can be effectively explored to design new, self-directed

learning approaches" (Wankel, 2010, p. 186). Through the social interactions, it is

believed, employees develop skills in actual promotion, and learn in presenting

themselves appealingly how to market in general terms. In pragmatic terms, these skills

are inevitably enhanced through the user's more confident applying of visual and audio

components to their media input. In a sense, then, social media "trains" users in all the

techniques typically important to conducting business efficiently, as employees acquire

what may be termed "self-marketing" abilities.

Connected to this positive effect is the inevitable role social media plays in

individual networking. LinkedIn is the premier site devoted to a focus on creating and

maintaining professional relationships, and its presence reflects the public desire for this.

Over half of its millions of users hold Bachelor or higher degrees (socialmediatoday,

2013), reinforcing the site as geared to furthering personal advancement   Profiles are

created and exposed, presenting virtual resumes, and of a kind far more informational

than the standard. This translates to advantages for business as well; LinkedIn and

related sites today become the arenas for recruitment, and the virtually unlimited

information provided by the user, often including references and work samples, does the

work of headhunter departments (Qualman, 2012, p. 178). There is as well the

exponential benefit of the social, in that users connect with one another to promote one

another and enhance the professional presences of all concerned through endorsements.

Issues notwithstanding, it is then evident that social media offers more than one

significant advantage in the worlds of business, and for employers and employees alike.

More to the point, this single aspect reinforces how social media has greatly altered

patterns of human interaction, fusing social and commercial interests as never before

possible.

Regarding education, social media provides crucial interactions in which all kinds

of information is disseminated. This is in essence an extension of the resources available

on the Internet; as students find material, they engage with peers and share links and

sources. Nearly 60 percent of students, in fact, claim they they use social media to

discuss assignments and exchange information (ProCon.org, 2012). The "classroom" is then extended beyond traditional parameters to the virtual, which translates to far greater opportunity for students to engage with one another in these ways. Then, as the media is actively online, the processes are immediate and the social discussion of the subject may occur as the relevant information is retrieved. Here again, then, dimensions of human social behavior, even of this specific kind, expand to an unprecedented degree.

The Social Advantages

Assessing the actual benefits of the social in social media is complicated, if only because this aspect is so inherently individual. Hundreds of millions of people engage in the media strictly to interact in social ways, but this of itself renders any determination of actual advantage difficult; that is, it is as likely that a user, unhappy with a lack of response or interaction one day, will be enthusiastic about the media on another, when they are engaged in a more satisfying way. This element of the personal aside, however, the reality remains that social media provides opportunity for social intercourse as has nothing else in human history. Former obstacles of distance, inability to see the other, and time are no longer relevant, just as the media serves to cross cultural boundaries. In plain terms, a young user in the American Midwest may establish friendships with any number of people overseas, and of any age and background. The only limitation to the actual online socializing, in fact, lies only in the efforts made by the users.

This being the case, there is a widespread belief that social media permits interactions vital to the well-being of those restricted in physical ways. The virtual nature of the contact allows the handicapped to maintain active relationships, just as it

encourages those suffering from loneliness or social disorders to make contact helpful to

their emotional states (ProCon.org, 2012). Such individuals may proceed from a feeling

of safety; they can connect but distance is still within their control, and this element of

control goes to interactions for all. An issue with social media, in fact, has been the

ability of users to construct online identities not in keeping with reality, and inflating

personal assets. However, and interestingly, there is an increased awareness that the

media itself limits this; as more friendships are taken on, there is a greater likelihood that

falsehood will be uncovered, so users are presenting themselves more honestly

(Chambers, 2013, p. 64). Consequently, as social media evolves, its very impact goes to

generating a more "literal" presentations of identity, so users are more honest with one

another because *others* affect the control factor.

In plain terms, and data notwithstanding, it is difficult to refute that social media

allows for a wide variety of personal advantages. Users may enhance their senses of self-

esteem through the gratification of the interactions. Interests may be shared and

developed, as specific hobbies or preferences bring people together, and online

friendships may be established by the force of a shared sense of humor alone. The realm

is virtual, yet it relies on all the elements which draw people together in the "real world,"

as images, video, and video chats also bring the physicality of the users into play. Not

unexpectedly, and dating sites aside, users engage in social media to seek and promote

romantic interests as well. All of this then reinforces that social media is not any type of

human behavior or activity, but a channel for them.

Nonetheless, so radical a shift in ability translates to changes to function,

perception, and behavior. While social media enables connection to inestimable degrees, it must also affect the commitment levels of users, as well as their senses of identity and role in the society. This then equates to changes in the nature of interaction itself, if only because individual investment is altered, which in turn occurs whether the user perceives the media as helpful or otherwise. For instance: "Social networking sites play a key role in youth culture because they give youth a space to hang out amongst friends and peers, share cultural artifacts...and work out an image of how they see themselves" (Barnes, 2006). The parameters of behavior, simply, are boundless and this is then a quantitative change so enormous, it goes to the qualitative. Then, it is noted that social media has altered the meaning of "friendship" in modern culture, actually lessening the degree of intimacy once associated with it (Chambers, 2013, p. 41). Consequently, even the positive effects of the media evince shifts in how human beings perceive themselves and relationships.

Negative Effects

Assessing the negative effects of social media demands an understanding of the potentials within this unprecedented arena, in terms of enabling expansions of *all* human interaction. To begin with, if the media allows young people to interact as never before, it allows as well for aggression and outright hostility as equally unconstrained. A great deal of attention is being given, for example, to cyberbullying, which often occurs through social media channels. Typically, adolescents and children target a vulnerable peer and make personal attacks seen by all with access to that victim's page; it is bullying taking place, then, in an immensely large arena, and this exacerbates the effects. If in the

past a victim was hurt only to the extent of being witnessed as victimized in a literal

space, there are today thousands of witnesses, so the effects are more severe. Depression,

anxiety, extreme senses of isolation, and suicide have been widely noted as generated by

cyberbullying (O'Keeffe, Clark-Pearson, 2011, p. 801). Then, it is inescapable that the

cyberbullies comprehend the greater power at their disposal, which affects their

motivations in attacking. It is one thing to bully in a schoolyard; it is quite another to do

so when it is known that the entire peer group, inevitably engaged with the media, will

provide an audience. A single behavior, then, and one clearly harmful, takes on new

dimensions as enacted through social media.

On a more pragmatic level, another negative consequence of social media lies in

how its success has generated privacy intrusions unacceptable to many users. Laws and

policies are undergoing change, but the current reality is that, when anyone supplies

personal information to Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, or LinkedIn, the sites share this

information with the merchants subsidizing them. This translates to tides of unsolicited

emails and promotional offers, as the user's preferences are employed to place them in

marketing demographics. Connected to this is the growing concern of how this

information is being used non-commercially, and placing the users in ranks going to

specific – and usually highly personal – populations. For example: "Mining online

communication has already helped Microsoft identify women at risk of postpartum

depression" (Jayson, 2014). Also: "A social exchange between friends has now become a

way for universities to monitor student behavior" (Barnes, 2006). All of this clearly

emphasizes important changes in human perception and behavior; ironically, the

willingness to interact and share has generated a backlash, and even active social media users are struggling to maintain control of the personal information initially, and willingly, provided. The playing field is so enormous, and so many conflicting interests are now represented in it, the concept of privacy takes on multiple meanings removed from traditional definitions of it. With such change, then, must come changes in how people view their safety, and also in how they respond to perceived and unjust threats to it. Even when the intrusions are "mild," as in commercial emails, users tend to react angrily, which supports social media as enhancing ideas of personal entitlement or esteem. It is arguable, in fact, that privacy issues in social media are triggering "old-fashioned" responses to privacy violations once only literal, even as, again, the users participate in the processes enabling them.

Perhaps the greatest concern regarding negative impact, however, lies in the very nature of social media as socializing dependent upon technology, and consequently removed from the traditional and literal expressions of it. From its inception, social media was criticized as being a transparent and weak substitute for genuine human interaction. It was – and is – argued that virtual connections, apart from the inherent degrees of potential deception within them, are not "real" and cannot then satisfy basic human needs to connect socially. Such thinking is generally dismissed by users who insist that, while they fully enjoy the benefits of social media, they have no illusions as to the greater value of literal connections. The former need not, they feel, be seen as a replacement for the latter, but should instead be viewed as an enhancement.

Nonetheless, and interestingly, the perception of social media as intrinsically

"unreal" persists. On one level, it is noted that users are increasingly very aware of

sacrifices due to engagement in social media. Nearly a quarter of Americans surveyed,

for instance, express concerns over missing out on important life moments because they

are in fact focusing on capturing them *for* social media exposure (Henderson, 2012).

This presents the disturbing possibility of meaning as being, not weakened, but

transferred to a public arena and thus no longer viable as such. Conversely, Twitter, with

hundreds of millions of users, is a virtual chat room in which the trivial is constantly

offered as news, and "events" such as purchasing shoes are posted even as the shoes are

being paid for (Tomczek, 2011). Twitter draws criticism along these lines because its

continual process of alerting friends as to the current activities of the user is seen as an

unwarranted excess of unimportant information. Patterns and processes of human

behavior change, then, as social media, by means of so vastly expanding what is possible

in communication, generates differing -and unprecedented – types of behaviors.

Conclusion

If it is reasonable to assume that the immense popularity of social media translates

to its ongoing presence in daily life, it is then all the more important to note that this is no

mere extension of human socializing. The sheer size of the media, with hundreds of

millions of users interacting on a variety of platforms, is so impactful that human

behavior undergoes change. Certain elements are familiar, as the media enables

friendships, romance, and shared interests. It also provides great commercial

opportunities, as it enhances educational processes between students. At the same time, it

presents a world that is still virtual, and increased attention to it devalues literal

experience. It also enables behaviors which if not new, like bullying and privacy

intrusion, are taken to new levels, and subsequently new meaning through the expansion.

No matter the course social media takes in the future, it is then clear that, other

ramifications aide, it is changing the ways people regard – and conduct – their social

lives.

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