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Social Media Around the Table

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Social Media Around the Table

Abstract

"Social media and smart phones will probably affect your next social interaction—especially social gatherings of many people."

Posting about being present with loved ones during the holidays from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/social-media-around-the-table/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

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in things

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Social Media around the Table

Luralyn Helming

Social media and smart phones are ubiquitous in our society;¹ the average use of smart phones in the United States is about two hours a day.² Since social media is primarily accessed on smart phones,³ it is reasonable to discuss the effect of both cell phones and social media together rather than trying to tease apart which one is responsible for influencing society. Together, they have changed the landscape of communication and society.

We know that social media is influencing the way people feel. Social media use is moderately related to lower stress, lower moods, higher anxiety, increased sleep disturbances, lowered self-esteem, increased envy and frustration, and increased loneliness.⁴

However, social media also creates in us certain habits of interaction. Social media allows us to connect with people all over the world; in those connections, we gravitate towards the people we are familiar with or who hold views that similar to our own. This way of building connections is true in all aspects of life, but in the physical world, we are forced to interact (to some extent) with the people around us—even if all we have in common is residing in the same community. Online there is no common aspect that forces us to interact with people with whom we disagree, resulting in what are referred to as echo chambers. As we share our thoughts and opinions online, they are heard by our friends or followers who have already decided to friend or follow us because of some shared view or experience. The result is that we listen to the people who are like us and hear our own views and opinions repeated over and over again, leading us to believe that they are more common and reasonable than they may actually be. It can also lead us to become more extreme in our views because we are encouraged by hearing others agree with us, an experience related to group polarization.

Cognitive processing is another avenue of change affected by smart phones. The use of cell phones is making us worse at multi-tasking—something we are unsuccessful at in general. Our brains have a very limited capacity of what they can actively process at any one time. Rather than truly multi-tasking, what we are generally engaged in is switching back and forth between

tasks very quickly. As we use smart phones, we are more and more distracted by all the other features on the phone. We are less able to accomplish the single task because we switch to the next task and the next task.⁵ We struggle with our ability to focus for an extended period of time. As a part of this, we are also anxious about what we are missing, which is called “the fear of missing out” (often referred to as FOMO). We need to keep in constant contact through social media because new information is always appearing there, and we don’t want to miss any of it. This fear and its cause—the continual update of new information—are related to what is now being seen as an addiction to social media. Research cannot keep up with the rate of change in social media options and usage, but the features of addiction are being identified in people related to their social media use.⁶

What is the most concerning for our face-to-face interactions is that the mere presence of a cell phone seems to have a negative impact on interactions. When a cell phone was present, as compared to a notebook, participants in one research study indicated that their conversations did not lead to feelings of closeness or trust in their conversation partner.⁷

Social media and smart phones will probably affect your next social interaction—especially social gatherings of many people. The people you are meeting are likelier to experience depression or depression-related symptoms because of social media. People are less practiced in civil disagreements because they are unaccustomed to interacting with people with whom they disagree. They are also unaccustomed to having those conversations face-to-face, rather than being able to hide behind the anonymity of the internet. People will be more easily distracted and less able to cope with or ignore distractions, and they will struggle to focus on the face-to-face conversation for fear of missing out on the social media interactions. And even when the phone is down—unless it is out of sight and preferably out of room—it will not be out of mind.

So, this holiday season, leave your cell phone with your coat in the entryway and focus on being present with the people around you. Remember, you are better off not missing what is in front of you than what may or may not be happening somewhere on the internet. Be supportive of and patient with your friends and family as you practice having discussions face-to-face and consider practicing civil disagreements. If we cannot find common ground with family and friends, we will not be able to find it with strangers. Take a break from social media, and if you think you might have an addiction, use the holidays to re-evaluate what truly matters in your life when there are many activities going on around you to replace time spent on social media.

However, do not be too discouraged about the effect of social media and smart phones;⁸ the written word, printed books, radio, and television have all failed to precipitate the end of civilization. Humans are adaptable and curious; we will find new ways to fill our time as our fascination with smart phones and social media evolves. In the meantime, remember to be with the people you are with; and perhaps consider turning off that television, too, to have a conversation with the people you are with.

FOOTNOTES

1. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/> ↩
2. <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2018/time-flies-us-adults-now-spend-nearly-half-a-day-interacting-with-media.print.html> ↩
3. <https://www.crimsonhexagon.com/blog/people-access-social-media/> ↩
4. <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20180104-is-social-media-bad-for-you-the-evidence-and-the-unknowns> ↩
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkdcnkGBQSw> ↩
6. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2017/06/30/a-run-down-of-social-medias-effects-on-our-mental-health/#c2de1932e5af> ↩
7. <https://digest.bps.org.uk/2012/09/24/how-the-mere-presence-of-a-mobile-phone-harms-face-to-face-conversations/> ↩
8. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/04/social-medias-small-positive-role-in-human-relationships/256346/> ↩