The Power and Responsibility of Social Media

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ENG-141-01D: 4SP2020 Research and Writing

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April 2, 2020

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How many times a day do we check our phones for social notifications? Social media is everywhere. Every day humans are surrounded with easy access to their social network of choice, whether it is Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, or Twitter, and so many more. Social media platforms have evolved and increased rapidly within the last few years. Social media can be used, and used well, for many different things, such as connecting with friends and family, to advertise a product or business, and sharing of news and events. The way each person uses social media varies drastically. Social media has many positive effects on society, as long as it is used ethically and responsibly by its users.

In the late 2000s, several new social media giants were emerging. MySpace was one of the biggest competitors in the market at the time. Now, that particular social media platform barely exists, as we know that Facebook has quickly swept aside much of the competition. Fast forward to today in 2020; we have more than enough social media networking sites to choose from including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, TikTok, WhatsApp, Tumblr, Reddit, Quora, and more. Byerly emphasized that “In 2009 (a decade ago), a Nielsen study showed that social networks and blogs were the fourth-most popular online activity ahead of email” (Byerly, 2020, p. 98). Today, most people only spend a few seconds checking email and spend more time browsing social media sites. That major shift in just a short amount of time goes to show that there is power in social media and social media networking. According to Smith (2011), “66% of online adults use social media platforms” (p. 1). We can only assume that the amount of social media users rises each day.

Social media can connect people to positive interactions. It can keep families and friends in contact over long distances. It can create online communities for people of all walks of life to interact and engage. It can keep people connected to their interests, whether it is politics, sports, music, arts, or entertainment. Lee and Lau (2018) stated that social media can be a helpful coping mechanism to facilitate self-expression and communication with others with similar experiences and to access motivational content. Social media has the power to provide many positive experiences, even though it has been met with some negative reviews or connotations. One of the features of social media is that anyone can say anything, with little censorship or barriers. This obviously comes with great responsibility toward cyberbullying; however, some studies have shown that not all effects of social media are negative. According to Johnson (2015), a study by Professor Benjamin Hickerson found that social media can actually help teenagers make new friends and maintain existing relationships (Johnson, 2015). Social media sites of today could actually be considered much safer compared to chat rooms from the earlier part of the decade. Social media companies have allowed each user to decide whom they want to connect with or “follow.” This creates a safe space for people to only connect with those they choose.

Another positive use of social media includes advertising. Companies no doubt joined the marketing bandwagon, and social media marketing has exploded in the last few years. “The use of social media advertising strategy has had notable influences on the advertising industry globally” (Lee & Lau, 2018, p. 137). Humans are inundated on every platform with several different types of ads, whether it is on Facebook, Instagram, or even searching Google. With the rise of companies like Amazon delivering directly to our doors within days, some might believe that social media is simply making it easier for us to get to the products we would otherwise have to drive to the store to obtain. “There is no doubt that consumers have become more reliant on social media everyday social activities and consumption. Consumers are even over-engaged in social media in both professional and personal manners nowadays” (Lee & Lau, 2018, p. 138).

With all of the good social media can bring, it also has its downfalls. Social media can certainly present negative views allowing anyone with access to voice their opinion, whether it is good or bad. Online bullying has become a serious problem in the last few years with the rise of social media and with younger generations adopting and embracing the social media world. It is the responsibility of each and every social media user, along with the company running that platform, to educate, inform, and monitor online bullying. Social media also allows people to harshly compare themselves to peers. Berry, Emsley, Lobban, and Bucci (2018) emphasized “that social media may elicit downward online social comparisons; that is, comparing oneself less favorably to others, leading to negative feelings” (p. 560).

Many social media users decide to take small breaks from social media in order to combat potential negative effects on their own mental health. Some call this “going off the grid” or “disconnecting.” Although I agree that each social media user should decide for themselves whether or not a social media break would benefit their mental health, a study has actually shown that “taking a vacation from social networking sites for a week was detrimental to more active users’ positive affect, and it did not decrease negative affect or improve life satisfaction. This result is contrary to much popular expectation” (Hanley, Watt, & Coventry, 2019, para. 34). If a person relies heavily on social media for everyday interaction, taking a break could actually be worse on their psyche. One of the responsibilities of each social media user is to constantly monitor their physical and mental health and how social media can affect it.

Another ugly side to social media is junk or “fake” news. After the 2016 presidential election, fake news has been on the rise. “In the US, 45% of respondents used social media for news consumption on a weekly basis, with Facebook being the leading source” (Burger, Soeradj, Pleijter, & Verberne, 2019, p. 1). Social media allows many news outlets, whether they are credible, reliable, or trustworthy, to post and share news articles. Many platforms, with Facebook leading the way, have been combatting the rise of fake news with new algorithms that automatically detect fake/junk news and fact-check that article. Other features implemented include the option for a user to submit a news article they feel to be fake or spam for review by Facebook. Another great responsibility of social media users is to make sure that they are following or connected to credible and trustworthy news sources. You can do this by doing some small research, including verifying the company’s website and making sure you are not following unverified pages.

Social media networking sites certainly provide many pros and cons. It is a wonderful tool that allows humans to connect and interact in a way that has never been done before. We can view, buy, and even sell products to people halfway across the globe.  People can indulge in their interests and hobbies while connecting with those who share the same interests. People can also learn and explore new interests and hobbies while maintaining a safe space from people they choose to connect with. With such a powerful tool available at our fingertips comes great responsibility for humans to navigate the social waters and make sure we educate and prepare for the next generation of social media users on the power and responsibilities that come with it. Moving forward, how will you use social media ethically and responsibly to make positive impacts on society?

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