

Conservative Anabaptists and Social Media

Where Have We Been and Where Do We Want to Go?

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Introduction

Joe heard a ding notifying him of yet another message. He reached for his phone, entered his passcode, and quickly read a WhatsApp message from a coworker. He sighed. His phone felt ever present, even though when he first bought it, he had thought it would save him time. But now, it seemed to consume more and more of his time.

Joe had thought it would create more connections with people, but now these seemed to be only surface connections. People he used to see in person now just sent quick short messages. Joe and his friends used to get together with people and talk about vacation experiences,



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now they tended to scan their friend's vacation pictures online. Joe wondered, does social media really connect us, or are electronic connections a figment of our dreams for these social platforms?

The purpose of this paper is to provide information that will help church leaders and social media users to better understand the history of social media and how it works today. It will also provide some helpful suggestions on how to be wise in our decisions about whether or not we use social media, and if we choose to use it, how to keep it from controlling our lives and hindering our relationships. We need men and women who can discern how to live for Christ in the digital age.

Part I: History of Social Media

If you have access to old postcards from relatives a hundred years ago, you may note that the brief messages bear a striking resemblance to today's text messages.

“I will be by Thursday morning for the green beans.”

“Went fishing today. Didn't catch much.”

“Mandy isn't feeling well. Fever and cough.”

How was social interaction different fifty or a hundred years ago, and how was it the same?

Your ancestors interacted in person. Women quilted or processed apples or corn together. Men gathered at the sale barn, young people had picnics or skating parties or singings, and everyone went to church.

In that era, relationships needed to work simply because one saw the same people all the time, mutually needed their help, and couldn't cut them out of one's life by clicking a “block” or “unfriend” button.

People kept in touch with faraway friends and relatives through writing letters, and many men and women of all ages were prolific writers.

Postcards were often brief, informative messages for people who were not near neighbors but still needed to know when someone would be by to pick beans.

Anabaptist publications in the mid-twentieth century helped to connect scattered communities. Ranging from the *Budget* to *Words of Cheer* to the *Gospel Herald* to *Family Life*, these periodicals introduced Anabaptists not only to theology and doctrine, but also to people and events in other locations. Many children submitted requests for pen pals to the *Words of Cheer*, which often began a years-long exchange of letters, and sometimes led to lifelong friendships.

If you were an Anabaptist child in the 1970s, you connected through school and church. After age sixteen, you likely attended youth Bible studies and volleyball games, then went to Pizza Hut afterwards. You “met” young people from other communities first through photos tucked in your friends' Bibles or arranged in their photo albums, and then through weekend road trips with friends and cousins. Sometimes, you became pen pals with people you met, exchanging paper-and-ink letters for months to come.

Girls talked to their friends at youth group events and called each other on the telephone attached to the kitchen wall. This carried the risk of being overheard, not only from family members but also from neighbors on the party line who might pick up their phones and listen. So, you stretched that coiled cord as far as possible so you could hide in the pantry to talk, and you listened for a telltale click on the line before you told any secrets.

The next day, your mom made you untwist that stretched, tangled cord.

Twenty-five years later, your teenagers' social landscape was unrecognizably different from yours.

For many Anabaptists, the change in communication began when they bought a personal computer with a modem. Before that, personal computers were exciting devices that simplified creating documents and bookkeeping. Modems allowed communication, via computer, with other individuals and the broader world.

Juno, a free email provider that did not include access to websites, was almost universally the carrier of choice for Anabaptists and their first experience of the online world. Messages became instant and electronic, no longer limited to shared space or a transported paper, and no longer overheard.

Children interacted with friends at school, then came home, sat at the family's desktop computer, listened to the beeps and whirs of the dial-up connection, and emailed their friends, often in rapid-fire back-and-forth conversations.

It felt almost miraculous—written words instantly flying back and forth. Best of all, it was silent, and no one needed to huddle in the broom closet to talk about anything personal.

Eventually, the same message could be sent to a whole group of people at once, and everyone could read the replies—our first electronic group discussions.

Soon, emails included photos, taken not with film but with digital cameras. “Should I get a haircut or not?” a nephew once asked in a group email, attaching a photo of his springy red mop. Friends and aunts chimed in with opinions. Again, everyone was miles apart in location yet part of the conversation. This was both “social” and “media,” and we were discovering its possibilities.

AOL Messenger, often arriving after a family upgraded from dial-up internet, was a precursor to texting on flip phones.

By the early 2000s, many had expanded from email to the world of the internet. Some Anabaptist communities and families, cautious of dangerous content, chose not to use computers to connect with others, thus closing the door to social media such as Facebook as well. Although most Anabaptist groups eventually accepted email communication, many chose to avoid accessing the internet and continue that policy some twenty-five years later.

Other Anabaptist groups chose to allow internet access for information and messaging purposes but requiring restrictions and accountability.

The social aspects of the internet soon moved from email groups to blogs, short for “web logs.” The platform of choice in the early 2000s was Xanga, where many young people posted photos and words about their lives.

You no longer looked at photo albums from Bible school, as Xanga offered much more information, photos, and connections.

Eventually, some realized they didn’t like to write, and Facebook, geared toward photos and brief posts, exploded in popularity among young people until parents and grandparents realized its usefulness in connecting with faraway friends and cousins, then young people abandoned it for other platforms.

Meanwhile, a forum called MennoDiscuss attracted hundreds to its lively conversations on Anabaptist life and culture. People became known by their online identities, or avatars, “TruthSeeker” or “WayneInMaine,” for example, and for their way of expressing themselves.

After Xanga faded away, many Anabaptists started blogs on Blogger or WordPress, sharing about daily life or a specific subject such as Bible study, cooking, or farming. A few Anabaptists started YouTube channels or podcasts on subjects ranging from fishing to theology to life as a housewife, drawing thousands of followers from outside the Anabaptist community and shaping the wider world’s perception of the culture.

Smartphones changed the landscape again. With their incredible versatility, one could capture photos and video, type messages or captions, and access the Internet from almost anywhere, checking on everyone else and sharing your own activities. You could also make phone calls, but, most likely, the younger people in your life prefer not to talk on the phone. This is unthinkable for those who longed for a bit of privacy with their phone calls in the 1970s.

Instead, they communicate by text, recorded audio, and videos, careening from Snapchat to TikTok to BeReal to the latest, ever-changing platform.

You may not be on BeReal, but the internet has probably changed your way of relating to the world, your choices, and your reading habits.

Maybe you share sewing or welding tips on a YouTube channel, trying to produce excellent content without obsessing about likes and comments. Maybe you’ve been drawn into the addictive nature of social media, scrolling through short videos on Instagram or engaging in heated debates on Facebook or Twitter.

Just when you tire of social media and consider unplugging entirely, you find just the right video on fertilizing hydrangeas, your niece posts a picture of her new baby, or hundreds of people assure you of their prayers at a time of family tragedy.

Social media today looks very different from a quilting in the 1920s or meeting friends at Pizza Hut in 1978, yet both offer a shared experience, catching up with friends, and conversation. Also, certain temptations are the same—gossip, indiscreet sharing, and unhealthy comparison.

We do not yet know the lasting impact of the internet and social media on our minds, families, and communities. We are not locked into our choices, and we are free to evaluate and change.

Some older people, once adamantly opposed even to email, have changed their minds because of social media's ability to combat isolation. Some young parents, having seen or experienced dependence on screens, choose to raise their children without.

And many, subtly drawn into the addictive nature of social media and shocked at its power over them, have chosen to deliberately and carefully monitor their time spent online.

Social media will continue to change at a wild pace, but our hearts, our weaknesses, and our need for both discernment and connection remain the same.

Part II: What is social media?

Joe looked at the clock. He was shocked to see how much time had passed since he had gone online to check his messages. How had that happened? Now more than an hour was gone, and he had accomplished almost nothing. He had checked his messages, then checked the news, then logged into Facebook, and here he was much later with only an empty, disappointed feeling. He loved being able to hear from friends and family on social media, but he hated the way he often got sidetracked and spent too much time online.

Probably many of us can identify with the love-hate relationship Joe felt with social media. It has benefits, but it can easily take more time and energy than we ever anticipated it would.

What is social media anyway?

We could start with complicated technical jargon that is difficult to understand, but let's define social media in simple terms.

Social: Being social means interacting with people and sharing information and ideas. We are social beings. God created us with a desire for a relationship not only with himself but also with others. We have a God-given desire to be part of a social community. This can be family and our church community. In the exchange of ideas and thoughts within a community, we gain a sense of identity and belonging.

Media: Media is a means of communication that reaches people widely. In the past, this included newspapers, radios, and books. While these are still being used, today it also includes the internet and the multiple apps and platforms that it provides to disseminate information.¹

Therefore, social media is defined as “websites and other online means of communication that are used by large groups of people to share information and to develop social and professional contacts.”²

What are some of the features that are common to social media?

Personal account: The personal account identifies the person who is sharing information. It often includes some profile information about the person, such as their photo, workplace, hometown, interests, and connections with other users.

1 Nations, “What Is Social Media?”

2 Dictionary.com, “Social Media”

Groups, followers, or friends: Most social media platforms allow the user to form groups with whom they can share information, have followers who receive updates when new things are posted, or have friends who are given access to information on the site.

Information updating, saving, or posting: The user of a social media platform can post information that is able to be accessed by others. This information is saved to the site and is available to the public.

Like buttons and comment sections: Most social media platforms allow other users to show they agree with or like something that has been posted. There is often also a comment section that allows others to make comments or reply to what has been shared.

The components we just mentioned—a personal profile, the ability to show or say something, friends or followers who observe, give simple feedback and longer comments—are compelling because they recreate elements of in-person interaction. Because social media creates opportunities for interaction and expression, it shares some of the strengths and weaknesses common in all communication and relationships: encouragement, preaching, evangelism, affirmation or misunderstandings, pride, and passing on gossip and rejection. It also adds some of its own strengths and weaknesses to the mix.

Various social media apps have many elements, like friends, likes and comments, in common, but each app focuses on a particular type of posted content. With Facebook this is a text or photo status which answers the question, “What’s on your mind?” On Instagram it is an artful photo; on YouTube, video of all lengths and types; on TikTok, short video; on Snapchat, a video just meant for the moment; on WhatsApp and Telegram, chat messages; and on Twitter, a short, public message. As companies create new apps, they explore other content niches.

The basic human need of expression which connects us to others is created by God and almost certainly a component of us being created in the image of God. Additionally, conservative Anabaptists especially value being doers, contributors and creators, rather than passive consumers. Because humans are social, the social media components we just outlined are increasingly found in business computer systems that were once cold and impersonal. These include business communications, online purchasing, accounting systems and other business applications. This has contributed to the issue of social media being a more complex question than the read-only broadcast media of the past, TV and radio, which was often answered with a simple “No.”

Part III: The objectives of social media and needs of its users

Social media apps have obvious characteristics and goals in what they set out to allow people to do, as mentioned in the previous section. In addition, apps have less apparent dynamics that also warrant consideration such as an uncanny grasp of the desires and motivations of the humans using them. Therefore, we should have a knowledge of the complicated technologies involved and consider the desires of advertisers and others shaping public opinion.

Human needs

At their core, social media platforms are fueled by the human desire to know and be known. The desire for connection, love, and affirmation remains at the very core of our being. Mankind is a unique creation that our Creator designed in His very own likeness. We know Adam walked with God in the cool of the day, a time of fellowship and connection with God. Instead of investing in their relationship with their Creator, many today turn to social media as they debrief from their day. However, in this relationship, rather than being led by God, they choose their own path. They control where they walk, what they see, and who stands along the sidewalks of their heart. They choose with whom they will pause and communicate, and for how long. They choose what they share and through which windows into their lives they will allow others to look. This reality helps us understand why digital platforms alone often make it difficult to see when someone is hurting or even numbing the pain of isolation, shame, or loss.

Social media attracts many of its users with a commitment to connect them with others. Users are asked to establish their identity by confirming contact information and establishing a profile on the platform. In most cases, users also create content, forming a way for them to share pictures, express ideas, and even welcome input from fellow users. It is this interactive sharing of content and input that helps us understand the social nature of these platforms and the appeal to humans who are created for relationships.

It is important to note that many users only post the highlights of life's journey. They want others to enjoy those moments with them. As a result, the feedback that they receive from other users is positive and rewarding, motivating them to post more of the same. User profiles and posts often reflect what the user wants those on the platform to know about them. It is not uncommon for user identities to reflect their ideal selves more accurately than who they really are.

Objectives of social media companies

Many internet companies, especially those that operate social media platforms, have desires, too. Being necessarily motivated by financial viability and growth more than a desire to fulfill their users' desires for love and connection, these platforms seek to capture and engineer users' attention in ways that aren't always in the users' best interest.

Many of the internet services frequented by average internet users are freely available to the public. Websites and apps such as Reddit, YouTube, The Weather Channel, Gmail, WhatsApp, and Instagram offer quick and pain-free access to whoever wants what they have to offer. Some of these internet companies offer paid upgrades with certain advantages. While most users opt for basic, free accounts, these websites and services, whether email, social media, or news, require a great deal of money to operate. Large corporations such as Google and Facebook spend many billions of dollars each year to keep their websites and apps functioning. So if most of these companies' users don't pay to use their apps and websites, how do they gather enough revenue to keep the websites and apps online? The answer is ads.

Rather than taking money from users of their services, many internet companies, including social media platforms, sell advertising space to other companies. The customers of social

media websites are not its users but, instead, other companies who want their ads to be seen. The ad industry has proven to be immensely lucrative for the companies who sell ad space.³ In 2021, Meta and Google, two of the largest companies whose revenue strategy depends on selling ad space, generated 114 billion dollars and 209 billion dollars respectively from selling ad space. Facebook and Google are the most extreme examples of internet companies gaining revenue primarily from displaying ads, but many smaller companies, including news and weather websites and even niche services such as pitch-pipe apps, depend on a similar strategy.

Marketing with advertisements has been familiar to us for decades. We have been seeing billboards beside the road and full-page advertisements in magazines and newspapers for generations. But online advertising functions very differently from traditional advertising that we see in the physical world. Traditional advertisements are the same for everybody. Everyone driving north on Interstate 81 on a given day sees exactly the same billboards. The same is true for advertisements in local newspapers. In contrast, internet companies have figured out how to make online ads much more effective than traditional advertising methods; they strategically customize the ads they display to individual users. Each user of Facebook sees a customized set of advertisements that will be most effective at reaching him or her. This customization has become crucial to online advertising industry and is a key factor in the way many free internet services, especially social media platforms, deliver content to users.

Social media companies that sell advertising space to other companies can guarantee that their ads will be seen by a curated set of people who will, as compared to the average user, be disproportionately likely to be influenced by the ads in question. To credibly make the guarantee to advertisers that their ads will be seen by people who can be influenced, platforms that sell ads must know a great deal about each user and be able to maintain the users' attention on their website or app.

Platforms are able to learn much about their users. Social media companies do this by accumulating data from posts that the user likes or dislikes, the subject matter and tone of posts the user comments on, how long the user stops scrolling to watch a video that appears in the feed, and the nature of a user's friends, groups, and the accounts they follow. Platforms such as Google are also able to build an extensive profile about users by interpreting data from its users' activities such as search engine queries, links clicked, videos watched on YouTube, and places navigated to in Google Maps.⁴

With a profile for each user, social media companies gain some accuracy in predicting which types of videos, posts, or news articles will keep a user's attention for the most time. This knowledge is of utmost value to social media companies because, as one writer said, "the more time you look, the more money they make."⁵ Since these companies prioritize content that keeps the user's attention, service to the advertisers, not primarily to the users, drives the platforms' choices of which content to display.⁶

3 Statista, "Meta's (Formerly Facebook Inc.) Advertising Revenue Worldwide from 2009 to 2021"; Statista, "Advertising Revenue of Google from 2001 to 2021"

4 Hari, *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention - and How to Think Deeply Again*

5 Hari, *Stolen Focus*

6 Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, 105.

Methods of maintaining users' attention parallel 20th century psychologist B. F. Skinner's theory called behaviorism. Skinner observed that an organism's behavior can be predicted and controlled by the stimuli in its environment and its history of reinforcement. Skinner's well-known experiments that demonstrated behaviorist principles included rats that were taught to trip a lever to be rewarded with food and pigeons that were conditioned to identify specific words with strategically dispensed rewards. Skinner demonstrated that, with rewards, animals can be taught many different behaviors. When an animal that has been conditioned desires a reward, it performs the behavior repeatedly until it receives the reward.⁷

We must be clear that humans are unlike the animals in Skinner's experiments in many crucial ways. Humans can make moral choices, reflect on their habits, and form new habits. Humans also are motivated by relational desires such as love, knowing and being known, and affirmation. However, Skinner rightly recognized that humans can be taught behaviors by reinforcement and respond predictably to stimuli.⁸ Engineers at social media and other internet companies also understand the ways that human behavior and attention can be engineered. They adapted Skinner's core techniques of conditioning to teach their human users to post just the right photos and other content to be rewarded with likes and affirming comments.⁹ Additionally, we learn that refreshing algorithm-driven feeds reward us with new and possibly exciting content. The rewards received from habits of posting, refreshing, commenting, liking, and scrolling may be infrequent, but they're enough to keep us engaged on a platform, exposed to increasingly accurately tailored ads, and generating revenue for the social media company.¹⁰

CEOs of prominent social media companies and the mission statements of these companies have, presumably with sincerity, articulated altruistic aims. They want to empower people to "build community and bring the world closer together"¹¹ and to "significantly improve the lives of as many people as possible."¹² A critique of the methods that lead to users' compulsive behaviors and manipulated attention is a different matter from a critique of the people who work for social media companies or their intentions.

Implications for users

From the users' perspective, social media platforms' aim to capture and retain his or her attention may seem like a downside of using social media. When we use a service, we prefer if the ones offering the service have our best interest in mind. It is worth observing that the ability to target ads has been very useful to small businesses, large corporations, and even a given social platform's users. The ability to target ads can be useful to businesses because it allows them to more precisely find potential customers who are interested in the services or products that the business offers, and it is useful to users because the ads they see are more likely to be for products or services that they would find to be genuinely useful.

7 Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, 8

8 Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*

9 Hari, *Stolen Focus*

10 Harris, "How Technology Is Hijacking Your Mind—from a Magician and Google Design Ethicist"

11 Facebook, "Our Mission"

12 Page, "2004 Founders' IPO Letter"

For example, the writers of this article are acquainted with somebody who works for a marketing agency that sells modest clothing for women. Meta doesn't allow marketers to target ads based on some demographic factors such as ethnicity and religion. However, she is able to target ads based upon age, interest, and location (Holmes County, Ohio, for instance, has a high proportion of women interested in modest clothing as compared to the general American population), ensuring that ads are seen by women who are most likely to want to purchase modest clothing. Similarly, our acquaintance has another client who sells rollover protection structures for old tractors. Rather than broadcasting ads to a wide audience, she is able to target ads to farmers, a demographic that is disproportionately likely to own tractors that may need a rollover protect structure. In both cases, the company in question benefits from such targeting; it knows that its advertising money is being well spent. Internet users also benefit by being helped to find good products or services that he or she wants.¹³

For users of social and other internet platforms, this means that there is a direct correlation between activities recorded by their phones and web browsers and the ads they see on websites and in apps. For example, users may receive ads for the goods and services, or even the software used, of the businesses they have visited in the previous days or weeks. While the primary data driving these ads is often not coming solely from social platforms, social platforms are often the most effective way to deliver these personalized ads back to the user.

One might recognize that in tailoring content to what an individual user wants, social media companies may have creatively solved one age-old conservative Anabaptist challenge of wishing to be separate from much of what doesn't represent their values. For example: secular Facebook working hard to only show plain Mennonites modest clothing would be unthinkable only a few short years ago in the age of the printed Sears catalog. On the other hand, an algorithm automatically determining what content to show a user might serve them content they really don't want to see with no easy way to stop it.

While use of social media platforms can be seen through the lens of manipulation by the platforms' drive for revenue, Christians can recognize the desire to know and be known as a legitimate motive for using social media. Both are real.

Part IV: Uses of social media

Joe listened as his brother talked about the dangers of social media. "I think it is dangerous and harmful and has no redeeming value," his brother emphatically stated. "I think fathers in the home and leaders in the church should ban the use of social media for the protection of our families and children. I do not use social media at all, and I can live a normal life without it. Others should do the same."

Joe weighed the advice his brother shared. It was true that there are dangers associated with the use of social media. Some were caught in addiction to social media and others had fallen

13 Gloria Croutch, phone call, November 3, 2022

into moral failure through inappropriate material they viewed online. Yet it did seem like there were some benefits of social media as well.

“Is it true that you do not use social media at all?” Joe responded. “Did you ever check CaringBridge to see how Aunt Ethel was doing with her cancer treatments? Have you gone on YouTube to find out how to fix a piece of equipment? Do you read the Telegram updates cousin Phil sends from his work in Africa?”

Joe’s brother paused and then replied, “Well, sure, I do those things, but that is different.”

The truth is that many people who do not think they use social media, are in fact using it. Their use is intentional and not indiscriminate. It will benefit us to look honestly at both the benefits and the dangers of social media and be intentional in our use.

Benefits of social media

Social connections for isolated persons: There are many causes of isolation in modern society. Some are isolated because of physical limitations. Others are isolated by choice because of where they live or work. Most of us have friendships with people whom we do not see very often but we enjoy knowing a bit of what is happening in their lives.

Missionaries are one example of people who live in some isolation from their family and church community. Social media can be a good tool for missionaries to stay in touch with family and the church community.

Elderly people or people with mobility issues can find social media to be a useful tool for communicating with people while they are unable to leave their homes. While not measuring up to the value of a personal visit, it does provide some interaction to help with feelings of isolation.

Some find it hard to meet new people and make new friends. The remote relational aspects of social media provide introverted people with a more comfortable way of communicating with those whom they do not know well. It provides a way for us to stay in touch with bits and pieces of information about the lives of people we know but never meet in person. Social media provides the opportunity for limited connection with people we may seldom, if ever, meet face-to-face.

Networking for groups of people with similar interests or needs: Social media provides opportunities for people with common needs to be able to share information and encouragement.

Online groups provide connections for parents of children with disabilities and for parents of foster and/or adopted children. In these groups, parents can ask questions of other people with similar life experiences and learn how others have responded to the challenges they are facing.

People with similar occupations or ministries can network with each other and share information and ideas. For example, there is an online group of conservative Anabaptist charitable organization directors. This group shares policies and information that is helpful to other people with similar organizations and responsibilities. The Dock is an Anabaptist resource for teachers that provides a forum to share information and learn from one another.

Encouragement and prayer support: Many of us have participated in praying for someone we know who is facing a medical emergency or family crisis. CaringBridge is a site dedicated to sharing updates from people who need encouragement and prayer support. It may be an accident victim or a family who had a house fire, or a friend who received a diagnosis of a serious medical condition such as cancer. Through CaringBridge, we can receive updates and pray more effectively for their current needs.

Missionaries can create a group with whom they share prayer needs and from whom they receive encouragement. When faced with a crisis, missionaries can now raise prayer support from hundreds of God's people in just a few minutes.

Sharing the Gospel and Biblical teaching: Some Anabaptists have effectively used social media sites such as YouTube in this way. Organizations such as Anabaptist Perspectives and Strength to Strength reach a wide audience and give an inside perspective on Anabaptist values and principles.

Some conservative Anabaptists have thousands of subscribers to their channel on YouTube. They regularly post videos that present everyday conservative Anabaptist life, as well as our worldview, theology, and beliefs. YouTube isn't the only platform available, there are also conservative Anabaptists who have a large following for their blogs or podcasts.

What was done in the past through street preaching can now be done online to a much larger audience. It is now possible for a conservative Anabaptist to reach a wide audience weekly.

Expressions of creativity: Social media also provides a platform for people to display their creative work. Woodworking craftsmen who formerly found customers through word of mouth or printed advertising can post pictures of things they have made. Authors and poets can post their work and develop an audience instead of waiting to be accepted by a publisher.

Communication tool for businesses and charitable organizations: Social media provides the opportunity for companies to communicate online directly with their customers or their employees. Employee notices and information can be easily and quickly sent to everyone in the group.

Charitable organizations can communicate with their staff and supporters online through social media. Consider the mission organization that has missionaries in many countries around the globe. These missionaries can hear from one another and share experiences through social media. Regular prayer and sharing times can be held with people from many countries participating. This can help build a sense of organizational togetherness and unity.

Publicity opportunities for businesses and charitable organizations: Social media platforms provide a cost-effective way for businesses to promote their products and services to a broad market. Special promotions and events can be advertised quickly and easily through social media. Targeted ads can reach a select group of people who are more likely to be interested in the product or service being offered.

This has created the opportunity for a small start-up business to reach customers even when competing against a much larger company. One no longer needs to have a large advertising budget to break into a market.

Charitable organizations can use social media to promote events and create awareness of both staff and financial needs. Updates can be posted that will keep supporters informed regarding ministry activities and create a greater level of accountability.

Finding instructions and information: From changing a headlight bulb in a car to fixing an air conditioner, or baking an angel food cake, videos are available that show how it is done. Posting a question online can reveal, for example, who repairs sewing machines locally and how others have experienced their work.

Dangers of social media

Anything with the power of social media has potential for negative impact and we are wise to be aware of the dangers.

The addictive nature of social media: Social media can be addictive due to the current nature of the content. We check the social media site numerous times a day, feeling that we may miss something if we don't.

If we are posting content on a social media site, we may get addicted to attracting views and likes. We may attempt to post things that will get the greatest involvement or reaction from the viewers. We may get drawn into the pursuit of more viewers or more likes.

It can be a time-waster: The creators and managers of social media sites design their content to be captivating and aim to keep our attention as long as possible. Most of us have probably experienced the emptiness of having spent too much time on social media and not enough time with face-to-face interactions with people.

Substitute for real action: We may substitute posts on social media for taking real action on an issue. Social advocacy doesn't equal social action. We can get a heightened awareness of social or political issues from one perspective. This can lead us to be drawn into political involvement that is not helpful. We can update our profile to support some cause or voice an opinion on a social issue, but we need to remember that simply posting something online in support of a cause doesn't represent an action to bring change. We need to do something to feed the hungry or protect the vulnerable to really make a difference. Social media posts are not a viable substitute for Godly action. Our time would be better spent in godly action.

Manipulation and consumerism: We are wise to remember that if social media platforms are free for us to use, there is another source of income for these platforms. It has often been pointed out that if we are not the customer of these companies, then we are likely the product they are selling to be profitable. Many social media companies make money by collecting user data and then selling it to marketing companies. For example, if you search for a specific product online, your screen is soon filled with ads related to that product.

Social media can put every product and service at our fingertips. It can create in us a consumer mentality that leads to us feeling driven to get more and more things that we do not really need.

Comparison and competition: When we look at pictures and posts by our friends and acquaintances, we can forget that their posts are not often representative of their daily lives. They are posting positive highlights from their lives and experiences. This can create in us

a heart filled with envy and the desire to outperform others. We can want the nicest house, garden, vehicle, vacation, or sporting experience.

The result is that we compare our own lives unfavorably with the lives of others and feel a deep disappointment or dissatisfaction with our own lives.

Loss of privacy: Privacy is not a strong point of social media. We voluntarily give up much information about ourselves through online services and social media. People post very personal details of their lives on social media platforms. Someone referred to this as “anonymous intimacy.” We pour out our hearts related to a very personal matter or relationship online where hundreds or thousands of people potentially will read it. We would never share those details before a crowd of one hundred people, yet we do it to a similar audience online.

Tribalism, polarization, and echo chambers: Social media platforms track the things we read and like. They then choose similar things to appear on our screen. Thus, we are often fed a steady stream of things that we tend to agree with rather than a balanced range of information. This can lead to us only seeing things from one perspective and never encountering other viewpoints. This is driven by the desire of the social media company to keep our eyes on their platform for their own financial gain. Unhappily, this can come at the cost of stunting our capacity to learn and grow and distort our perception of reality.

Decline in civility and public discourse: The relational distance of social media has also contributed to a decline in the tone and content of public discourse. People write things on social media that can be labeled as gossip and slander. Some people who are pleasant to talk with in person can become vicious and mean in their written comments on social media. Because online written communication lacks tone of voice and body language, even things that are not intended to be harsh can be interpreted that way by the reader.

With the decline in civility in online communication, we can become accustomed to more crudeness and rudeness, which can become the norm in our communication with others. We can repeat things we read online and bring confrontation and stress into our relationships.

Negative effects on mental health: Social media has contributed to negative effects on mental health. Youth are especially susceptible to feeling inferior to others as a result of their engagement in social media.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported on a study that showed that 32% of teen girls said they felt bad about their bodies and Instagram made them feel worse.¹⁴

Pornography and moral failure: Too many of our people have been drawn into the powerful world of pornography by using social media. The curious young person, and sometime even the most disciplined user, may be introduced to explicit content through social media. Many social media platforms have simple ways to erase their users’ activity, making the temptation to seek inappropriate content even more enticing. For those struggling with pornography, social media can be a real stumbling block and lead to further sexual sin.

14 Wells, Horwitz, and Seetharaman, “Facebook Downplayed Instagram’s Harm to Some Teens”

Misinformation: We should recognize that social media is driven by conflict. Media companies realize that divisive content leads to more engagement than unifying content. The sensational or controversial story or post draws more clicks and keep people on the site longer. Those seeking followers often post controversial things to engage more people.

Along with this trend, there is also the issue of misinformation that is spread on social media. Misinformation has been around for a long time. It is not something new in the digital age. However, social media gives everyone a free and easy way to get their views before a large audience. A good communicator can seem so convincing that people believe what they hear or read without checking the credibility of the person presenting the material.

We tend to trust people we know, so when a friend suggests that we check out an online post, we tend to think it is reliable and true. We need discernment to determine what is sense and what is nonsense. Even those who do not use social media may be influenced by things that are shared with them by those who do use it.

On the matter of truth and discernment, the previous Viewpoint paper entitled “Truth and Discernment” is a good resource on this subject.

Functional relativism: With the tremendous growth in the amount of information available, we can become functional relativists. We can act as if there is no absolute truth. We choose our expert and then run with their “truth” without questioning if it is absolutely true. People begin to make comments such as, “Who knows what is true?” and “We can’t really know what is true anyway!” We have given in to the belief that the truth is unknowable or that there is no absolute truth to be known.

Part V: The Church’s response

Joe and his fellow ministers sat around the table and looked at each other with uncertainty in their eyes. They had just been talking about social media. Joe had shared his own experience with spending more time than he wished on social media. What they were experiencing themselves and hearing and seeing among the members of the church they were leading concerned them. It seemed like some people were spending inordinate amounts of time online posting on social media platforms. Others were sharing YouTube videos with each other and encouraging others to watch things that they thought were profound and important. There had been a few people in the past year who had confessed to a struggle with pornography and were in the process of being disciplined and held accountable.

The men around this table didn’t know what to do. Should the church give more guidance and direction to the members about the use of social media? Should they perhaps have a Sunday morning message or two on the subject and encourage people to make wise choices? Should they have a members’ meeting to discuss the issue? How could they encourage their people to take individual responsibility and provide accountability? “Is the church providing enough social interaction and sense of brotherhood that online connections fill a proper place in their life?” they asked each other. “Is this an issue that requires a response from the church? Is it a church

matter or a personal matter? Is it an issue that should be dealt with at the church level or within each family?”

They all agreed that discernment and discretion are required of Christians in their use of social media. But what, if any, boundaries should be set by the church?

The problem Joe and his fellow ministers faced is a common one. We can identify the issue of concern, but knowing what to do about it is a much more challenging endeavor.

The digital age has brought significant societal changes. These changes are not yet complete. The time we are living in is similar in some ways to other significant pivot points in history, such as the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Age. In each of these eras, societal norms and values shifted and changed. When societal changes come, the church must adapt and learn to thrive in a world that twists and turns itself into new shapes and forms. When riding a wave of change, it is necessary to look ahead, and plan accordingly rather than simply live in the moment and try to avoid failure.

Therefore, we believe that social media requires a response from the church. Knowing how ubiquitous, potentially damaging, and addictive it can be, makes it an essential aspect of Christian discipleship.

The Christian who desires to be in the world, but not of the world, should be informed, intentional, and accountable if or when they engage online. Social media creates a desire for products and influences our way of thinking. The power of the algorithms can and should be counter-balanced by relational input and accountability in the brotherhood of the church.

Church leaders are described in Scripture as those who watch out for the souls and give account for those in the church (Hebrews 13:17). An online presence affects not only individual church members, but it also has an influence on the entire congregation. The church has three avenues to influence social media practices among its members; visibility, community, and accountability. The church can raise the **visibility** of the issue of social media usage and make members aware of the challenges it presents. The church provides a real, in-person **community** experience that meets social needs and creates opportunities for members to interact with one another. The church can also provide **accountability** for members regarding their social media usage.

We should not underestimate the significant place that church as brotherhood can have in the health of a church member's internet habits. One research project that investigated characteristics of those with internet addiction proposes a correlation between internet addiction and social ill-health. Those without strong community and deep relationships are more prone to seek fulfillment of legitimate social needs or alleviation of loneliness through imperfect means such as increased engagement on internet platforms.

While it's unclear if a causal relationship exists between internet addiction and social ill-health, those seeking a less dependent relationship with social media and the internet should consider building closer relationships with others in the church. This is where the church can take action. The New Testament describes a church that fellowships frequently, eats together, and regards other members as family, using words like “brother” and “sister.” The church is the institution

that provides the best alternative to internet addiction: a close, connected brotherhood. Churches like Joe's, with members who are struggling with excessive use of social media, could ask questions like, "What meaningful connections does this struggling person have within the church? How can we deepen friendships with brothers or sisters here? How can our church foster quality relationships among members?"

Levels of church community regulation

What level of community accountability is appropriate? How much should the church regulate the internet usage of its members?

In the book *Facing Infotainment Technologies*, Daniel Ray Mast outlines the following general levels of internet usage among conservative Anabaptists:

Level A: No personal interaction online

Level B: No internet connections allowed to members' computers and devices. Sometimes the internet might be used at other places.

Level C: Only email accepted to member's computers

Level D: Email, plus internet access limited to several websites listed on a whitelist

Level E: Internet web browsing accepted; using a church-specified internet filtering service for Anabaptists that screens sites and/or filters the content. Access limited to desktop and laptop computers: no internet-enabled mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets.

Level F: Internet web browsing accepted using an internet filtering service for Anabaptists that screens sites and/or filters the content. Internet access may be from anywhere and on any device, including smartphones and tablets.

Level G: Filters and accountability encouraged, but no church-specified technical restrictions on internet usage are mandated.

Because social media is so pervasive and powerful, it does seem wise for the church community to have some agreement on the level of usage and accountability. Churches will take different positions on this issue. As church communities, we can respect each other in our choices regarding usage and accountability. Within the local church, we should be willing to sacrifice our personal preferences and support the position the church has taken.

Some will decide to avoid the dangers by not engaging in online communication. We should respect those who see this choice as the most prudent option.

Ultimately, the choice of usage rests with the individual. No church community can monitor every member's online activity all the time. Therefore, teaching self-discipline and voluntary compliance to a godly standard of online behavior is crucial.

When we go online, we do not lay aside our personal values and principles. We ought to be aware of the benefits and dangers of social media and, if we choose to use it, we ought to do so intentionally. If we are not deliberate in our usage and guided by godly wisdom, the tech companies will guide us into unrestricted use that will be detrimental to our spiritual well-being.

Part VI: Practical suggestions for intentional social media usage

Purposeful usage

Having a shopping list is helpful when going to the grocery store. A list keeps us from forgetting to purchase things we need, but it also helps us not buy things on impulse that we do not need. In the same way, knowing what we intend to do online is helpful. We can go online for a specific purpose such as to post pictures, get inspiration for a project, answer messages, relax, catch up with friends, and watch the latest comment storm. None are necessarily right or wrong, but defining our purpose keeps us mindful and aware.

Limited usage

How often do we access social media in a 24-hour period? How much time do we spend on social media a day? Many of us would rather not know the answers to these questions because we have a nagging feeling that the numbers would be too high for our own comfort. Yet we do not gain anything by ignoring reality.

How much are we using social media? It is a good exercise to track our social media usage for a week and record every time we go on social media and what we do there. This gives us the facts about our current social media behavior.

With this information in hand, we can evaluate our social media usage and decide how much time is appropriate for us on social media. We can set overall time limits for social media usage. We can set goals to limit our usage to certain times of the day.

Remember that social media is designed to draw you in and keep you engaged, so don't feel like you are weak or immature if you need help beyond sheer willpower. Possible "assistants" include timers, apps on your phone that pop up with reminders or turn off the program after a specified amount of time, and accountability partners in real life.

It may be helpful to think about how we begin and end our day. Is it with social media or with the Lord Jesus? We can choose to have no social media before our Bible reading and prayer time in the morning and end our day with prayer and reflection before God rather than with social media.

Suppose we find ourselves absentmindedly picking up our phones during times when we should be engaging in conversation or relationships with real people. In that case, we can ask our family members to impose a small fine on us every time they see us online during that time of the day.

One young woman says, "The best thing you can do to get off your phone is to buy an alarm clock and a wristwatch, especially if also has a stopwatch and timer. Phones are a mix of functionality and social life in one device. It's like if every time you turn on the kitchen faucet, your faraway aunt pops up and starts talking to you."

Avoiding addiction

We can avoid addiction to social media by engaging in meaningful relationships with real people offline. If our social needs are met in the context of community, we will be less likely to be addicted to social media as a way of connecting with people. Problematic social media usage rarely happens to those with healthy socialization and circumstances.

Working on our spiritual and mental health can help us balance our usage of social media. It can be helpful to ask myself what I avoid by escaping into an online world. Dealing with the reality of our lives is better than looking for an escape route.

Things like a social media-free day each week or a 30-day social media fast each year have proven to be beneficial disciplines for many users. Practicing a social media fast periodically can be a way of gauging our emotional dependence on social media. It can give us the opportunity to reset our social media practices.

In a world constantly bombarded by media perhaps we ought to at least consider the option of less online interaction as a default position and seriously evaluate the influence of social media in our lives.

It is easy to blame our frustrations and challenges on social media platforms. But we must realize that social media is not the problem. The problem is the desires of our heart. Our challenge is to keep our minds and hearts focused on things of the Kingdom of God in the time in which we live.

Jesus taught that it is not what goes into the body that defiles the person but what comes out of the heart. Our heart is molded by what we put into our minds and hearts through our eyes. Jesus said, “The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matthew 6:22–23). Scripture also admonishes us, “Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life.” (Proverbs 4:23).

There is no replacement for a heart that is turned toward God. No external controls can replace a heart that is in tune with the Holy Spirit of God and readily responds to his conviction and guidance. Loving God and being committed to pleasing him is the best guide to instruct our use of social media.

Church leaders, parents, and individuals need to work together. We need to teach and guide our families into a passion for God and for the brotherhood that will first and foremost direct our hearts toward God and His kingdom. We also need men and women who are willing to make intentional sacrifices and develop clear values and boundaries to help guide our children, churches, and communities. We need men and women who can discern how to live for Christ in the digital age. Can Christ and the church count on you to be one of those individuals who models living wisely in our times?

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