140 Character or Less: Is #SocialMedia the Decline of Civilized Society?

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To say that modern technology affects our world is quite an understatement. For the majority of Americans, we hold instant globalization in the form of message alerts to our iPhones as we regurgitate Twitter headlines as conversation fodder at cocktail parties. We develop connections over the Internet, we stream news information into our brains from the New York Times app, and we expect, if not demand, expediency and immediacy. But with all of this power and all of these resources, have we really enhanced our lives or have we overburdened them? As we now exist in an era that prioritizes convenience over politeness, we are left to wonder: Is this how American society is meant to function?

Defining “Social Media”

As we all sit here, even with our telephones tucked neatly into either our pockets or bags, it is hard to ignore the grip that social media has on our society. Unlike other forms of media, the term social media is difficult to define because it cannot be packed into a neat explanation. Similarly, social media is growing and changing so quickly, that even the definitions we have always seem incomplete or inadequate. Because of its explosive and constant growth, social media can be defined in many ways. For our purposes, I will use Jan Kietzmann’s definition from her article “Social media? Get Serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media.” She states that “Social media employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content” (Keitzmann, p. 241). This definition refers to virtual interactions via the Internet, where people create, share, and exchange information. Some of the most popular examples of social media are text messaging, Tweeting, Facebooking, commenting on Web-based forums, and essentially all other ways of virtually communicating and interacting.

The objective of social media is to be more useful than is harmful, as it provides us with the resources to have all of the information and communication we could ever need at our fingertips. In recent years, there are an increasing number of examples in which social media has become more controversial, especially for the following reasons: Rapidity is praised, especially with the creation of websites such as Twitter, where posts are limited to a maximum of 140 characters. This brevity breeds an environment wherein people only gain snippets of knowledge and consider themselves inaccurately informed on a particular topic. With instant messaging and text messaging, it is quite easy for us to communicate with one another, but staggering statistics on the increase of cyberbullying imply that it would be best if we did not. Most terrifying, with the power to anonymously contribute inflammatory comments on non-moderated Website comment forums, people lay themselves open to attack and consider themselves privy to perhaps the most disturbing corners of their and others’ psyches.

Yet, at the same time, social media forums have contributed to our society in many beneficial ways. As I mentioned, social media has enabled a skyrocketing in our ability to communicate with one another (Skyping, text messaging, and emailing allows relatives and friends to maintain contact even when thousands of miles away from one another). Alerts through social media are becoming increasingly helpful in tracking missing children and warning large groups of people about impending dangers (e.g., severe weather occurrences). Additionally,
our access to information, scholarly or otherwise, is more readily available than ever, thanks to media outlets and digital libraries becoming increasingly available through social media.

The shared assumption in contemporary culture is that social media settings create a predominantly positive effect, as they provide the ability to generate and cultivate communities, virtually uniting groups of people to share and discuss and share personal opinions and experiences. Unfortunately, we are often presented with counter-claims of reality that oppose this idealized assumption. With our definition in mind, I shall investigate the expectations and outcomes of the previously listed examples. By exploring these examples, both constructive and destructive, I argue that social media settings act as a catalyst in the decline of civilized American society.

Some examples of the negative ramifications of the prevalence of social media

Contributing Forbes Magazine writer Haydn Shaughnessy maps out the evolution of social media having a negative impact on to his work and social life in his article, “Facebook, Twitter? Can The Decline of Social Media Come Fast Enough?” Shaughnessy asserts that blogging was the first driving power in social media becoming a source of negativity. He explains that it was the first determining factor in turning Internet users into slaves to the system, explaining that “It seemed, right from its inception, that blogging created a new kind of force, a desire to follow and a willingness to let the genre be, in a sense, monarchical” (Shaughnessy, web). The power did not stop there, however. Shaughnessy continues by saying that he gave up his smartphone when he found himself using it in bed; next, he backed off of his Twitter and Facebook usage. He concludes by emphasizing that while he is a beneficiary of social media itself, he “can’t help thinking that social media amplifies the dangers of the crowd and we’re just not owning up to it” (Shaughnessy, web). The danger of social media, according to Shaughnessy, is that it now serves as a runaway train where reason is buried by the noise of the crowd.

Aside from the concern that social media causes in the minds of people like Shaughnessy, others are noticing even more catastrophic consequences for a generation that places such great emphasis on immediacy and a sense of connection. It is not hard to remember the day of the Boston Marathon Bombings, the heartbreaking tragedy that killed and injured many, and left the nation in cataclysmic alarm and confusion. In a Huffington Post article one week later, Katherine Bindley explained that in the wake of the distressing incident, an Internet community, who attempted to band together as freelance vigilantes, ended up causing more harm than good. In her article, Bindley explains that the members of Reddit.com, an extremely popular social news and entertainment website used by 6% of all Internet users, in a delirium of anger and with noble intentions, started a threat entitled “FindTheBostonBombers.” When a commenter posted that she recognized a missing Brown University student, Sunil Tripathi, in the footage, other commenters quickly decided that a supplemental picture of Tripathi that was provided matched the “Suspect 2” photo released by the FBI. News vans staked out the already-distressed family’s home, and the members of the family were harassed, virtually and otherwise. When the actual suspects’ names were released, the forthcoming apologies were woefully insufficient. It was not long after this incident that the body of Sunil Tripathi was found in the waters off India Point Park, near Brown University. Though the cause of death was not certain, many speculated
suicide. While the expectation of social media is to ascend us into an age far superior and groundbreaking, it has also assisted in sending us back to the ages of “witch hunts and dangerous speculation” (Bindley, web).

Quite similarly, we can touch on many instances of social media revealing the true priorities of our society that we do not wish to think about: How about the couple that created an account on GoFundMe.com (a site that enables users to generate webpages for crowdfunding) brazenly asking friends to finance their wedding? Better yet, how about the infamous founder of SleeplessInAustin, who created this website in order to generously offer $1,500 for someone to find him a “quality” wife. Enthusiastically explaining that his ethereal goddess shall not have had many past sexual partners — or in his eloquent words be “a promiscuous slut” — and must be white, the author of this site was shameless in demands that he would likely not reveal in person. These charmers are only a click away, thanks to social media. And why not? Social Media require no checks and balances to keep people from posting, Tweeting, and blogging as they please. In many cases, there is no moderation or purification process, other than that of common sense. (And, unfortunately, social media quickly show us that common sense is not necessarily a common trait.)

Even more frightening than the lack of moderation is the sense that this power has gone to our heads. While magazine articles once sparked lively discussion in everyday conversation, the ability to anonymously comment on articles online tends to expose the pieces of humanity that we try to conceal. Internet users can rattle off incoherent paragraphs on Web forums and comment sections, hiding behind the ever-courageous veil of anonymity, filling these forums with explicit-language laden posts. That is to say, bullying no longer requires face-to-face interaction. Unfortunately, some teens are taking this Internet abuse further, launching personal attacks against classmates and even friends. According to BullyStatistics.org, over half of adolescents and teens have been bullied online, and about the same number have engaged in cyber bullying; More than 1 in 3 young people have experienced “cyberthreats.” More than 25% of adolescents and teens have been bullied repeatedly through their cell phones or the Internet. Not only are these statistics alarming, but they are also representative of the way we are choosing to use our social media power.

In her essay entitled “The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families,” Dr. Gwenn O’Keeffe warns that “it is important that parents become aware of the nature of social media sites, given that not all of them are healthy environments for children and adolescents” (O’Keeffe, p. 800). Dr. O’Keeffe explains that there are many benefits of children and adolescents using social media, such as socialization and communication, enhanced learning opportunities, and immediate access to health information. But is it enough, she wonders, to cancel out the associated risks? In addition to the dangers of sexting (“sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cell phone, computer, or other digital devices”); cyberbullying and online harassment; and Facebook depression (“depression that develops when preteens and teens spend a great deal of time on social media sites, such as Facebook, and then begin to exhibit classic symptoms of depression”), O’Keeffe also notes concerns on a greater scale (O’Keefe, p. 802). She points out the greater problems of privacy concerns, the influence of advertisements, mixed messages from parents and the law, O’Keeffe demonstrates the overwhelming influence that social media forums have over people in
American society. She places the responsibility on pediatricians and parents to educate children and equip them with the requisite knowledge when traveling into the social media sphere, but she acknowledges that this is quite an immense challenge.

Children and teens, however, are not the only ones who are feeling the effects of cyber bullying. In an August, 2013 article, writer Jonathan Valania laments the toxicity brewing in the comment section of Philadelphia Magazine. Providing examples of racist, sexist, and otherwise hateful statements made on Philly.com, Valania directly points to the Internet as the sole catalyst in overturning the rock from under which these “racists, sociopaths and assorted trolls” scuttled. Valania explains that while freedom of speech inevitably opens the door to distasteful discourse, “the Internet has been a game-changer in the hate-speech sweepstakes, allowing anyone to instantly comment on just about anything. The online-comments sections…deface the walls of award-winning reportage with their graffiti of ignorance and intolerance” (Valania, p. 1).

According to Valania, the main issue with online commenting is that it can be done anonymously. He explains that “Anonymity breeds contempt. It subverts the social compact that keeps polite society reasonably so: We know who you are, and you will be held accountable for your actions” (Valania, p. 2). Without anyone to monitor the individual comments, and without any type of standard that users must reach in order to be published, the poisonous combination of anonymity and ignorance allows us to see the way that Americans think when no one holds them accountable.

While Philadelphia Magazine may be writing about the atrocity of these comments, other online journals are noticing as well, and taking action. As of September, 2013 Popular Science completely shut off the ability for users to comment online. In an article explaining why it was taking online reader comments out of the equation, Suzanne LaBarre insisted that though it was a difficult choice to mute everyone, even the delightful and thought-provoking commenters, “even a fractious minority wields enough power to skew a reader's perception of a story” (LaBarre, web). LaBarre’s point shows that while ignorant comments may seem harmless to those who can differentiate between a worthwhile remark and an uninformed one, the hurtful comments are the ones that may be persuasive.

In contrast, other major media networks, such as CNN, are becoming increasingly reliant on social media as a source of content creation. As networks are expected to fill a 24-hour news cycle without 24 hours of worthy stories reportable, these networks resort to their viewers’ tweets as pseudo-news. Under the façade of actual reporting, many broadcasting networks now take time to respond to their viewers’ Tweets as a time-filler. This practice is a testament to the laziness of some 24-hour news channels in the wake of social media, and it is disturbing. News networks use social media as replacements for legitimate reporting, creating a norm out of this false attempt at real journalism. To insinuate that these reporters are allowing non-reporters from Twitter to do their job for them may be slightly harsh; however, what now seems evident is the fact that even major news sources have developed a reliance upon and generally unhealthy relationship with social media.

Finally, although a website such as Wikipedia might only be on the periphery of social media, it is representative of the turn that our society is taking. Similar to the interactive environment bred through social media, Wikipedia provides explanatory articles about a plethora


of topics, most of the articles anonymous and compiled by many different people. Our
generation’s willingness to take the items we see on websites such as Wikipedia and claim them
as our own is demonstrated the New York Times is now referring to the current generation of
students as “Generation Plagiarism” (Gabriel, New York Times). The modern-day assumption
that items on the Internet are public property that can be taken at one’s leisure is resulting in a
generation of high school and college students who “don’t see what the big deal is.” As young
people are so eager to document their every thought on social media forums, it produces an
environment where they feel that all Internet information is theirs for the taking. Some educators
put great efforts into running student assignments through advanced technologies to determine
whether or not something is a students’ original work; however, other instructors are alarmed at
the claim that “There’s no such thing as originality anyway,” an assertion made by Helene
Hegemann. Hegemann, a German teenager, was unapologetic after the discovery that she
directly took passages from other authors without documenting them. Interactive media sites,
such as Wikipedia, definitely assist in the notion that borrowing other authors’ materials is
acceptable, as it is so accessible (Kulish, New York Times).

But don’t social media tools do more good than harm?

Here’s a thought: Perhaps this instantaneous connection to other people can provide us
more safety than in the past. The newest iPhone software update came with the notification
option of “Government Alerts.” This provides both weather warnings for local areas, and
AMBER alerts immediately sent to all telephones within the range of the particular notification.
After this program was launched, some called into question the effectiveness of this system. Are
iPhone holders simply being alarmed and awakened for no significant effect, or can blanket
notifications for a certain radius actually provide immediate and instrumental aid in emergency
situations? According to MSN news, in February (less than a month after the program was
started) an abducted 8-month-old was recovered after a Minneapolis teen received the
notification, recognized the suspect’s car (included in the message), and contacted police;
similarly, in July, an 8-year-old Cleveland child was discovered and returned to his family, after
recipients of the alert spotted the suspect’s described vehicle, followed it, and called the police
(Eng, Web). But, you have to ask, is this the kind of citizen vigilantism safe and recommended?

In a similar vein of good-heartedness, online communities are now getting extremely
involved in charity. In my high school years, I spent a great amount of time on a Website called
theChive.com. theChive was the quintessential Internet community, uniting people with similar
interests in a vein of positivity and inspiration. Self-proclaimed as “Chivers” and “Chivettes,”
members of the Website virtually communicated frequently, and sometimes organized unofficial
meet-ups at bars and restaurants in big cities. TheChive’s main purpose was to brighten people’s
days with an everyday post called “Daily Afternoon Randomness.” This daily delight, created
essentially as a way to entertain people while at work, is filled with 30+/- pictures that are funny,
awe-inspiring, or motivational. It was not long after I began reading theChive that someone sent
a plea for help to other Chivers among them. With heartbreaking photos of a little red-headed
girl riddled with hospital tubes, the post explained that Lilli Wilson had “a very rare
developmental disorder affecting only 600 people worldwide,” and that the medical costs were
wearing extremely on the family (TheChive.com). Together, theChive community raised over
$34,000. Instead of writing it off as a one-time event, the creators of the Chive decided to push their Chivers a little further and create an entire Chive Charities initiative. At this point Chive Charities has now assisted in providing six different grantees with thousands of dollars for medical bills. This is now a common trait for many Internet communities. Reddit.com frequently makes the news for contributing on a large scale to individuals, or through small acts of kindness, such as sending pizzas to children requesting pizza parties while in cancer wards.

As I mentioned earlier, in her article about social media’s effects on children, adolescents, and families, Dr. O’Keefe did acknowledge many positive results of social media use. She emphasizes particularly the ways that social media assists in adolescents socializing and communicating, their enriched educational opportunities, and the fortune of such rapid access to health care information. Social media is a crucial part of our society now, and the benefits can be plentiful, especially for children.

We must wonder, however: do these benefits of social media cancel out the damages done?

**So, where do we go from here?**

Interestingly, social media news outlets are all over the topic of social media in recent years. In a recent *Guardian* article, Rebecca Savastio asserts that recent studies show that “social media makes us dumb, depressed, rude and envious” (Savastio, Web). Building off of this point, *The Daily News* reports that this very social media rudeness is affecting our real life, in-person friendships. Finally, there are numerous articles similar to *The New York Times* one that claim that “narcissists thrive on social media” (Twenge, Web). How can we alter these troubling statistics about our faltering friendships and our intensified narcissism?

While it is easy to argue both that social media outlets are beneficial or detrimental to civilized society, the truth is that social media simply assist in showing the more uncivilized side of people, such as their narcissism or our rudeness. Needless to say, all nations with access to social media are in a crucible moment in terms of technology. Facing the delicate frontier between technology as a valuable resource and technology as a destructive catalyst, we must figure out where we stand moving forward. We cannot simply limit technological advances; perhaps, instead, we need to look at how we can limit ourselves. From the amount of time we spend on the Internet in any given day to providing education to younger generations about self-moderation and the truth behind a false notion of privacy: these steps are now necessary in American society.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Ultimately, I sometimes try to imagine telling my great-great-grandparents about the Internet, and, more specifically, social media. I imagine telling them that we hold unlimited wealth of resources, access to books, articles, and connections with one another within the palms of our smartphone-clad hands. I imagine trying to explain to them that we have the ability to spark discussion and debate instantaneously from great distances under popular magazine and
newspaper articles. I imagine trying to explain that instead of intelligent debate, we write grammatically and factually inaccurate slurs to one another from different pockets of the world.

I will not be dishonest about my connection to social media. Like many others my age, I am an avid Facebook and Twitter user. I am one of those people who is quite attached to her telephone, and I have very little ground to stand on in terms of calling out other people for their overuse of social media. In short, I am not anti-social media. The entire foundation of social media relies upon the fact that there are no boundaries, no check-points, and no limitations. This is the part of social media that I believe my generation can work to change. Whether it is by calling more attention to it, a la Philadelphia Magazine, or following Popular Science’s direction and eliminating the ability for people to interact in certain forums at all, I think a large change needs to happen.

So here, I return to my original question: Is society functioning in the ways that it should, and what role does social media play in that?

Truthfully, it seems that the real problem is not social media — it is us. Social media gives us the platform upon which we can reveal the true depths of our character, and our most private thoughts and, unfortunately for some, that is not always a pretty or safe place to be. The ignorance that exists in the shadows of society have always been there, but social media now gives the platform through which these shadows can be brought to light.

As Benjamin Franklin said, “The rapid progress true science now makes occasions my regretting sometimes that I was born so soon. It is impossible to imagine the Height to which may be carried, in a thousand years, the Power of Man over Matter...Agriculture may diminish its Labour and double its Produce; all Diseases may, by sure means, be prevented or cured, not even excepting that of Old Age, and our Lives lengthened at pleasure even beyond the antediluvian Standard. O that moral Science were in as fair a way of Improvement, that Men would cease to be Wolves to one another, and that human Beings would at length learn what they now improperly call Humanity.” Franklin is correct in asserting that technology will make great leaps and bounds in the years after his death; however, his thought was that this would mean “Men would cease to be Wolves to one another.” If technology has taken us so far, why does it seem that in many ways it has contributed to bringing out the ferocity of those wolves that Franklin would diminish with time and progress? Why have we become less civil instead of more? I believe Franklin would argue that responsibility and accountability have vanished from the equation which yields a proper human character. I would argue that as well.
References


