

ACADEMIA | Letters

Reflections on Social Media

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Is social media ushering in a new dark age? We suggest there is evidence that a dark age is imminent if not already ushered in. If so, what are the chances it can be stopped? Although chances are slim, there are possibilities if human willpower can be fortified. How? By actively engaging in real body-to-body *community living*. The desire for community *not* only runs deep in the human species but is absolutely necessary for survival - as sociologists critically point out. Living a robust communal life minimizes, for example, many negative cultural effects such as American individualism for a host of reasons (Christakis, 2019; Bellah et al., 1985). If American individualism can be tamed, the dark age effects of social media can be as well. But it will be a difficult process. Social media is designed to trick users into subconsciously believing communal needs have been met in some concrete way and with great ease. In the end, however, online community is only a mirage - the focus of our reflections. We proceed by first discussing the negative impacts of social media and, secondly, physical face-to-face community as a countermeasure.

Social research has revealed the downsides of social media (Christakas, 2020; Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018), concluding its' negative impacts far outweigh any positives. The gravest negative impact is the correlation found between social media and teenage suicide (especially girls) but extends into depression, loneliness, anger, narrowing of one's worldview (dark ages), and others. Andrew Marantz of *The New Yorker* adds to this disturbing list:

They [social media] seemed to assume, blithely and conveniently, that the marketplace of ideas would take care of itself. This isn't what happened. Instead, with shocking speed, social media decimated professional media, abraded our civic life, coaxed us into unhealthy relationships with our phones and with one

another, harvested and monetized our personal data, warped our brains and our politics, and made us brittle and twitchy and frail, all while a few entrepreneurs and investors continued to profit from our addiction and confusion (January 15, 2021).

Sociologists observe that humans cannot survive let alone flourish without body-to-body and face-to-face interactions given their ontological status as social beings. Yet, here is social media making every effort to provide its users with community – something it actually cannot provide.

Sociologists have long argued that modernity brought in its wake the decline of community. Concepts such as anomie, alienation, disenchantment, ennui, false consciousness, and individualism have been used to describe this loss of community by a host of thinkers (Durkheim, 1912; Bellah, 1985; Putnam, 2000). We argue similarly in claiming that social media is a social mechanism accelerating the pace of community decline and deterioration even though social media's creators believed the opposite. The creators, however, like social media users, are sociologically and psychologically naïve about the relationship between human nature and online community because this relationship is merely a mirage. So how does social media manage to construct such a mirage?

One-way social media accomplishes this sleight of hand is by seemingly providing people with instant community - simple computer clicks. It's as easy as that – click and you have a host of people with whom to socially interact – a community. Important to notice is the fact that this takes very little effort (a mouse click), but this also indicates something is awry. Over time, clicks from a computer mouse become a trigger for dopamine release. This triggered dopamine fixates one's attention over time to one social platform, eliminating other platforms, and ultimately narrowing one's worldview (a dark age). Social media becomes, in other words, psychologically addictive. A kind of mirrored psychology has been transacted in that social media mirrors back to the individual that their *single* social platform satisfies their communal needs. Unaware of this mirroring, many users begin replacing their physical presence within real communities with online mirage community. Why? One simple reason is because it's easier. Easier than traveling to meet others, easier than actually talking, and much easier than managing your everyday impressions or prosocial communal behavior. Yet community on social media is sociologically naïve because strong human community requires physical proximity, body-to-body and face-to-face contact over long periods of time. Even those involved in on-line gaming communities know that in a time of crisis it will not be one's gaming community coming to the rescue. In fact, if a gamer stops playing he/she will probably never hear from other gamers again. Social media users lack a social realism in their naïve ritual-like participation in mirage community, triggering a host of social and

psychological ailments.

What solutions might exist to counteract this online naiveté? Our suggestions range from a foolproof solution to a specific countermeasure. The foolproof solution is simply to delete all social media from one's life – complete severance. Given this is unlikely, countermeasures are required. The most effective countermeasure is to get physically involved in *alocal community*. It sounds simple but it's not, especially in America where the fundamental value of individualism reigns. And this individualism is only exacerbated by social media. This is particularly true for the *I-generation* (born after 1995 and made early use of the *I-phone*) who have been exposed to social media at very young ages (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018). This generation has not only been exposed to bad ideas on social media but also to the sociologically naïve view that online communities fulfill real communal needs. Algorithms are only getting faster and more efficient at generating the communal mirage. Social media's methodology is to maintain user's attention by building on a person's previous clicks. Based on one's social media activity, the computer algorithms bait one with only those ideas, people, and material items most capable of retaining his/her attention. Doing so generates confirmation bias or the silo effect, diminishing an individual's willpower to entertain different views as well as more easily falling victim to one's more sinister side.

Given this confirmation bias, willpower becomes an issue, specifically its diminishment. It has been shown that willpower is reset every day and fades quickly as the day progresses. In the first hour, willpower is at its peak with critical thinking, mental effort, and emotional restraint in-tact. Hours later or after completing a day's work mental stability progressively wanes. By the end of a rough day, very few are able to mentally temper their emotions being isolated from real people community influences. Depleted willpower makes one vulnerable to social media's various strands of manipulation, making the adaptation to involve oneself in a real physical community less likely. Social media's negative socialization techniques are relentless in that its' algorithms work day and night to create this mirage community. Over time social media produces slave-like users who usher in society wide misinformation (dark age).

From our point of view, social media is a form of narrow communication that tricks people into thinking they have community. Social media is not only a poor mechanism for forming community, it is communication without community (Han, 2020), while real human community is not so easily conjured up. People who move away from their home of 50 or 60 years, for instance, actually believe community will be easily found in their new location, only to be confounded in discovering that community is not so *easily* established. Finding a new community is easier *said* than *done*. Indeed, the community you hope to join, the people whom you hope to become friends with might not, for one thing, "like you." And even if you do

manage to find a friend or a community, how deeply meaningful are these relationships? Establishing friendships and community takes time, often “lots” of time. But in the age of social media, community becomes just another commodity to itemize and own. It’s not surprising therefore that Americans engage in more fleeting relationships, drugs, criminal activity, and suicide than most other post-modern societies. Yet, here comes social media legitimizing such mobility by arguing the community one just physically abandoned can be maintained online or, even better, simply replaced by a new community online. Thinking one can become a member of a new community so easily reveals a deep sociological naïveté and lack of social realism. The solution is to limit one’s time on social media and increase one’s physical interactions with others – literally, join a community and put in the effort – nothing worth having is easy.

References

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