

What are we doing?

The spinning wheels of social media

Personally I have an addictive temperament. Cannabis, chocolate, sweet things, amphetamines, needing to be seen. All these I have been addicted to at different times. Nowadays one addiction of mine is clicking and checking on BBC World News about 10-20 times every day.

Fifteen years ago Facebook did not exist. Social media was an unknown concept. Swiping meant a cat batting its toy. Tweeting was the sound that birds made. A lot can happen in fifteen years.

Social media enables contact, communication, sharing of information and views. Individuals can exchange experiences and lessen social isolation. Connection is essential to us as human beings and social media helps this connecting. Insights and positive relationships happen through social media.

The world's knowledge is now in our pockets. Endless options for entertainment are just that swipe away. A friend said: "Even my hippy mum who resists all forms of modernity has discovered YouTube conferences, articles on Google (the answer to all questions!), and the delight of seeing pictures of her daughters, grand-daughter and friends." These are all big pluses.

Recently I was on a protest march with tens of thousands of others. The advertising for this mobilisation was primarily done through social media. Channels such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter. We have much to be thankful for – thanks to social media.

Our abilities to access information have been significantly improved. Connections across continents are more possible. Interconnecting of many is reality. This is the age of internetting. Many changes have been hugely positive for the quality of life.

GOLD RUSH

And yet. Information is the new gold rush for corporations. We freely hand over personal details so that we can be sold more stuff. According to one study, 3% of Americans sleep with their smart phones in their hand. When given the choice between not having sex for three months or not having their smartphone for one week, nearly a third choose the not having sex. In online communication, there is a stripping out of social graces and nuanced meanings. The virtual world can be fairly flat with the complexity of human emotions reduced to emoticons.

When we are using social media, we must remember that it is designed to keep us using. It is intoxicating. Facebook claims that on average people spend more than fifty minutes every day on its platform. That is a lot of time. Facebook had 1.8 billion users by December 2016. That is a lot of users. The structure of social media triggers dopamine in the brain. Dopamine is the same hit that a gambler gets. Or the crackhead. The addictive stimulation that ensures the user keeps consuming.

Our consuming of social media links to the exhausted state that many of us experience. The façades of connection and the addictions to immediacy are draining. It is emotionally impossible to have hundreds of friends – let alone more than a thousand. Yet in social media world, this is what many of us have. The intensified stimulating of personal screens clearly links to the widespread epidemic of exhaustion and sleep deprivation is definitely detrimental to our well-being.

STICKINESS

For myself, I experience stickiness in my interactions with social media. Easily am I dragged into the feeds, searching for the likes. There is that fear of missing out. I become a rabbit on the road, mesmerised by the beaming lights of these feeds and likes, those tweets and links.

Emotional extremism is the common currency in social media. The height of highs and the depth of lows. Little in-between. It is like a speeded-up soap opera with each episode a car crash, a broken heart, a domestic dispute, a love affair, a serious illness. But much of life is quite mundane. Got up. Brushed teeth. Looked out the window. Fed the dog. Waited at the bus stop. Went to work. The extremism can make these ordinary everyday moments feel drab. Actually these ordinary moments are perfectly beautiful in their mundane manner.

It is insightful to watch how we engage with social media. Not too often are words really being read that thoroughly. Rather there is a vague haze of scrolling. Limited connection. Little depth. More a stream of flashing lights and seducing adverts, a spectacle of egoism and exhibitionism. We become hypnotised by feeds. We are glued to our devices.

A revealing fact is that some top executives at social media corporations send their children to schools without computers and do not let them use technology at home. We could wonder why. What do they want to protect their children from?

SWITCHING OFF

I believe there is a need for great self-discipline when using social media. And this is hard. It is a challenge to switch off. We can be scared of doing nothing. So we switch on. Which then means we are switching away from our inner landscapes as we consume the social media. Filling the gaps. But gaps could be good. Rather than filling the gaps, maybe a feeling of these gaps. Can we pause? Could we stop? Just for one second...or ten? Because switching off might enhance mood.

Someone said that if you thought Facebook was shallow, then Twitter makes it look like Tolstoy. What will happen in ten years' time? A mere ten years ago was the first iPhone. In 2017 more than 80% of people in the UK own a smartphone and nearly 60% of ten year olds have their own tablet.

On our devices it is fascinating – and frightening – to watch how fast adverts appear on the personal screens. Aiming of adverts has become highly individualised. One self-described 'recovered Facebook addict seven years clean' wrote: "It's as if they have taken the top off my skull and plucked out my top idea and then looked to sell it back to me... They know stuff about us that we don't know." We are being besieged by our wants. Of course this happens anyway. Any time we walk into a shop the wants are being heightened. But social media greatly magnifies these wants.

SNOWSTORMS AND BLIZZARDS

We have to be clear. In these snowstorms of stuff we are becoming blinded by the blizzard. We are easily confused. Readily deluded. The philosopher, Yuval Noah Harari, wrote: “Censorship no longer works by hiding information from you; censorship works by flooding you with immense amounts of misinformation, of irrelevant information, of funny cat videos, until you’re just unable to focus.”

We need to query our relationship with the screens and the interactive channels. Are we esteeming ourselves through social media? Is this esteeming a hole that requires continual filling yet is rarely satisfied? I have not seen evidence that shows a correlation between ‘likes’ on Facebook and being happy. Some research indicates the opposite: that the drive to get more ‘likes’ actually makes us increasingly unhappy.

Rather than stopping our interaction with social media, this is a request for us to be clear, thoughtful and cautious. Social media is a powerful tool that too often is being used without consideration for the profound ways it impacts upon our lives. Matthew Sweeney, an Ashtanga yoga teacher, wrote: “I implore students and teachers, stop giving importance to the outward, external and visual. Stop abusing social media. And don’t support the teachers and practitioners who are indulging in this kind of addictive behavior.”

For London yoga teacher, Marcus Veda, an important question is “how to positively navigate what is now the largely unavoidable storm.” Social media undoubtedly has great potential for spreading ideas. It can be an information superhighway that educates and illuminates. And it can be a deep trap of neediness, a pit of self-indulgence into which many of us fall. Social media sometimes sounds like a lot of people off their heads shouting at each other. Few are listening. The din is deafening. Conversational tangents spin off like a spider on speed stung by a scorpion.

KEY QUESTIONS

From telling of tales around fires to the Gutenberg Press in 1440 to the digital age, communication between human beings has changed over the generations. I am grateful that this piece is being publicised through the social media channels of this digital age. I use social media as an advertising tool. It appears to be such a cheap way to advertise but it actually comes at a cost. This cost is the details about our lives. Data is gold dust and we are giving our lives away for free. This is the advertisers’ dream come true: specificity of information about each individual consumer.

Key questions for us to ask are: what encourages calm perception and what heightens hysteria? What assists transformation and what fuels materialistic consuming? What clarifies and what mesmerises? In reflection, I wonder if we can dialogue the relationships between technology and humanity. How can we have a healthy balance? How do we evaluate the push and the pull? The attractions, the aversions, the addictions.

We could be conscious of looking at that which is around us in our immediate reality rather than being too anxiously attached to the mediated reality seen through screens. We could feed ourselves with conscious interactions rather than the shallowness of social media where there can be false feelings of belonging. We could remind ourselves to look out of the window and away from the screen.

Social media channels are powerful seducers that can make us less still and more nervous, less quiet and more stressed. Social media is an element in what has aptly been called “the depressive competitive disorder” where individualism and consumerism are being fed. Social media with its vanity mirrors and echo chambers, with its narcissism and superficiality, is an excellent example of how molehills can become mountains, of how moods can be lowered, of how energy levels can be depleted.

Notice how we use social media and then cultivate the discipline that helps to enable skillful using instead of being dominated and being used. Be aware that social media is both a stimulant and a sedative. Know that some social media channels are less commercial than others.

I continue to believe in love and hope. We can choose calm perception, transformation and clarity. Essential is the realisation that we are not passive pawns and that we have the power to shift our settings and change our directions.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR SKILLFUL USING

- i. A ‘watershed’ for interaction with social media/internet. For myself, it is 9pm. On occasion, that boundary is broken. However, this is my aspiration: a 9pm boundary for using social media/internet.
- ii. Examine the ratio between time spent using social media and time spent on practise for self-inquiry and transformation. Only engage with social media/world news/emails after practise.
- iii. That if posting as a yoga practitioner, avoid ‘show-off’ poses – and avoid wearing revealing clothes that are potentially sexualising (this applies to men as much as women).
- iv. When we are more familiar with using screens to communicate, a proposal is that we prioritise forms that emphasise live visual one-to-one (like Skype and FaceTime).
- v. Consciously attempt to lessen me/myself/mine in posts. Ask ourselves “why am I posting this – what is the reasoning behind the posting.” Be more interested in ideas and life than “this is my life”, “I am going to the kitchen”, “I put my underpants on inside out by mistake today”.
- vi. Explore the feeling of switching off this interaction for 24 hours. Observe reactions. If this feels too much then there could be an addictive quality to the engagement with social media.
- vii. For the modfather Paul Weller, the answer is obvious: “Get your face off Facebook and wake up the nation”.
- viii. It is possible to suspend Facebook accounts – maybe a week off each month.
- ix. Take social media channels off the smart phone (so only accessible on computers at home).
- x. Get out in nature. See the flowers and be with the sunset rather than photographing and recording. Have face-to-face conversations with friends – and strangers.

REFERENCES

“Personally I have an addictive temperament...”

I know that I am not alone. From a participant in study on impact of social media: “I am an addict. I don’t need alcohol, cocaine or any other derailing form of social depravity... Media is my drug; without it I was lost.”

quoted in <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/8436831/Student-addiction-to-technology-similar-to-drug-cravings-study-finds.html>

“Fifteen years ago Facebook did not exist...”
Facebook website was launched in 2004

“According to one study...” – quoted in:
<http://bigthink.com/david-ryan-polgar/all-netflix-no-chill-americans-now-have-more-tech-but-less-sex>

“It is intoxicating...”
From William Davies *The Happiness Business: how the government and big business sell us well-being* Verso 2015 (p206/207): “Neuroscience shows that the pleasures associated with internet use can be chemically identical to those associated with cocaine use or other addictive pastimes... Some psychiatrists have suggested that Facebook and Twitter are even more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol.”

“Facebook claims...” and “more than 80% of Britons...”
From Facebook advertisement in *The Guardian* 4 March 2017

“The structure of social media triggers dopamine...”
One article explores this point:
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/07/exploiting-the-neuroscience-of-internet-addiction/259820/>

“A revealing fact...”
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/technology/at-waldorf-school-in-silicon-valley-technology-can-wait.html>

“Because switching off might enhance mood...”
Studies by Professor Graham Davey at Sussex University came to this conclusion: “Our research shows that when you show people negative news stories, as opposed to positive ones or neutral ones, they grow more anxious, and rate their personal problems as significantly more problematic. They catastrophise...they make mountains out of molehills.”
quoted in Oliver Burkeman *The Guardian* 2 July 2016

“The philosopher, Yuval Noah Harari...”
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/nov/26/george-osborne-yuval-noah-harari-conversation>

“Matthew Sweeney, an Ashtanga yoga teacher...”
From a posting on Facebook
<https://www.facebook.com/matthew.sweeney.967/posts/1107447542703049>

“For London yoga teacher Marcus Veda...”
Personal communication March 2017

“Social media is an element in what has aptly been called ‘the depressive competitive disorder’...”
From William Davies *The Happiness Business* (p141-143): “One way of observing the

relationship between depression and competitiveness is in statistical correlations between rates of diagnosis and levels of economic inequality across society...depression is most common in highly unequal societies such as the United States and the United Kingdom...there is troubling evidence that depression can be triggered by the competitive ethos itself, afflicting not only the 'losers' but also the 'winners'...Perhaps it is no surprise then that a society such as the America's, which privileges a competitive individual mindset at every moment in life, has been so thoroughly permeated by depressive disorders and demand for anti-depressants."

"Know that some channels are less commercial than others..."

For example, Ello (<https://ello.co>) that claims to never sell user data to advertisers and never show advertisements

"Explore the feeling of switching off this interaction for 24 hours..."

'Addicts, lurkers and the envious "should break the Facebook habit"' *The Guardian* 23 February 2017: "Questionnaires conducted at the beginning and end of the week indicated that taking a break from the site increased life satisfaction and positive emotions"

"For the modfather Paul Weller..."

From lyrics of *Wake Up The Nation* (2010)

With thanks to everyone who assisted and contributed to this piece.

I have written other articles – from Ashtanga yoga to acronyms, from teacher/student relationships to yoga ethics. All are available here:

http://www.yogawithnorman.co.uk/writings_yoga_with_norman.html

I have also written a book – *Brightening Our Inner Skies: jin and yoga* – which is available here:

<https://mybooksource.com/brightening-our-inner-skies-pb.html>

If you would like to receive my monthly newsletter, please email

yogawithnorman@gmail.com.

Many thanks for reading...

Norman Blair

8 April 2017

www.yogawithnorman.co.uk