

# The medium is the message

## The spiritual impacts of social media

By Guy Brandon

*With great power comes great responsibility.* Uncle Ben, Spider-Man<sup>1</sup>

### Summary

The internet, smartphones, social media, instant messaging and other related technologies have had a dramatic impact on the way we communicate over the last 20 years, and therefore fundamentally how we relate to one another. Since we are relational beings, made in the image of a relational God, these far-reaching changes have innate spiritual significance. The pervasive nature of communications technologies means it is often hard to gauge their true effects on us, but exploring and understanding the implications for our lives and relationships is vital if their use is to be meaningfully aligned with our faith.

### The changing face of communication

Over the last 20 years a suite of new technologies has enabled instant communication on an unprecedented scale. Back in the early 1990s, international phone calls were expensive, airmail entailed a round trip of several days, and fax machines (which also incurred international long-distance charges) were often awkward to use and prone to hardware failure.<sup>2</sup> Now, we can live-video chat with a group of people scattered around the world, at practically zero cost.

Moreover, the web has enabled a step-change in the *nature* of communication. Before the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, communication was one-to-one or one-to-few; at best a message could be spoken aloud to a group in the same physical proximity. The ability to print literature in quantity enabled one-to-many communication on a new scale. Radio and TV accelerated but did not essentially change this: the direction of communication was still one way. Social media – platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit and many others – enables many-to-many communication for the first time in human history.<sup>3</sup>

Many Christian treatments of the web focus on a small number of key topics, typically including internet pornography, online gambling, file-sharing and other obvious pitfalls. This paper aims to unpack issues specifically arising from social media, rather than the wider internet, and to argue that these affect us at the very core of what it means to be human.

Social media has become so much a part of our culture and lives that the full extent of its effects can be hard to spot.

### The ethics and spirituality of technology

Technologies are applications of the properties of the world that God has created. It is therefore tempting to suggest that a given technology is as neutral as the laws of physics and maths on which it is built. Whilst this may arguably be true in its purest, most conceptual form, the reality is more nuanced.

History of technology professor Melvin Kranzberg memorably put it: ‘Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.’ The ethical impact of a technology is *always* subject to the ends of those who implement it.

By that I mean that technology’s interaction with the social ecology is such that technical developments frequently have environmental, social, and human consequences that go far beyond the immediate

<sup>1</sup> Marvel Enterprises, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The degree to which these solutions were adopted differed significantly across generations and home/business contexts.

<sup>3</sup> Institutions like parliaments and synods have always facilitated group communication, but there is a key difference in both the number of participants and the number with which each in turn engages.

purposes of the technical devices and practices themselves, and the same technology can have quite different results when introduced into different contexts or under different circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

The same can be said of the spiritual impact. A technology like a social media platform is implicitly the expression of the spiritual values of its creators and users. Neither is human nature neutral. We are Fallen beings (Genesis 3:6). On the other hand, we were created as relational creatures too, and social media offers us the ability to connect more effectively. Thus it implicitly holds out the promise of making us better communicators, better at relating to one another, and therefore perhaps even more human and more godly. Complicating matters is the way that the web and its associated technologies have permeated everything. Social media has become so much a part of our culture and lives that the full extent of its effects can be hard to spot. Much of the time our use of social media is so assumed or reflexive that we don't even recognise it consciously. But given the power and widespread adoption of social media, how could it *not* have any spiritual impact?

### Technology and relationship

Because technology reflects the values of those who implement and use it, any technology – and especially communications technologies – brings a change in the relationships of its users, as well as those who are in relationship with them.

Since the spiritual realm concerns our relationship with God and how that is worked out in our lives (1 John 2:3–4), a relational evaluation offers a starting point for understanding how social media affects us on a spiritual level. The five dimensions of relational proximity<sup>5</sup> may be used to explore some of the ways in which social media changes different aspects of relationship. The way we allow our human relationships to be shaped by this technology influences the values and habits we bring to our relationship with God, too.

#### 1 Directness: contact

The web and social media both increase and decrease directness. It is possible to communicate with someone – or many people – you would not otherwise have been able to reach. An instant message via social media is arguably more direct than a letter. On the other hand, that communication is mediated by technology and often lacking the 'bandwidth' or breadth of information that is far easier to access in a face-to-face, physical encounter, including voice tone, body language and expression.

This loss of information often gives rise to misunderstandings, both accidental and intentional. It is easy to disguise your identity online. This can range from the creation of a completely new persona with the intention of

misleading others for financial or other reasons, to the more subtle tailoring of image that is an almost ubiquitous feature of online interactions. To some extent this occurs in offline life, especially with people who do not know us so well, but the anonymity of the web makes it vastly easier – we only need upload the posts and pictures we want others to see.



The directness of social media means that we are able to access information that would have been censored or edited by governments, corporations and other organisations with their own agendas. The web is a democratising force that facilitates freedom of speech by removing the gatekeepers who might restrict our access to information. This has an important role in curbing excessive state and corporate power and bringing justice in situations where there would otherwise be none. It is unlikely that the Arab Spring could have happened or would have attracted such widespread international attention were it not for instant messaging and social media. As one Egyptian activist explained, 'We use Facebook to schedule the protests and Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world.'<sup>6</sup> The importance of social media for these events is reflected by the authorities' decision to cut off internet and mobile phone access during periods of tension.<sup>7</sup>

#### 2 Continuity: story

Relationships are established and maintained by shared time, over time. Social media is an excellent way of staying in touch at a distance. It lacks the bandwidth of a physical face-to-face encounter but facilitates ongoing contact. This is as true for day-to-day contact as it is for prolonged periods of separation.

However, communication might often be characterised as 'interaction' rather than 'relationship'. In the worst instances, use of social media can undermine relationship by *replacing* meaningful communication with a series of anodyne status

4 Melvin Kranzberg, 'Introduction: Technological and Cultural Change – Past, Present and Future', in *New Worlds, New Technologies, New Issues*, ed. Stephen H. Sutcliffe. *Research in Technology Studies*, vol. 6, Lehigh University Press, 1992, p.100.

5 See Michael Schluter and David Lee, *The R Factor*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1993, pp.68–92.

6 <http://mic.com/articles/10642/twitter-revolution-how-the-arab-spring-was-helped-by-social-media>

7 [www.nytimes.com/2011/01/29/technology/internet/29cutoff.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/29/technology/internet/29cutoff.html)

updates and passive or superficial engagement. More broadly, we might conclude that relationships conducted over social media are more continuous but ‘thinner’ than in real life.

There are also the knock-on effects that our engagement with social media has on our other relationships. In some cases, these can be positive. The ability to stay in touch at a distance can avoid the need to go into the office or stay longer at work, giving us more time with our families and friends. However, new emails, notifications and social media updates pose a magnetic and literally endless source of distraction that fills our time and detracts from whatever else we are doing – as a quick glance around the street, bus stop, cinema, café or church will demonstrate. All too often, this interrupts continuity in the short term. We have all had the experience of having a conversation cut short by a buzzing phone.

### 3 Multiplexity: breadth of knowledge

Relationships online may be real and meaningful, but the filters that the technology puts in place mean they are qualitatively different to those in real life. Even if you are connected to someone online, and even if you know who else they know, you probably don’t know much about *how well they know them*; ‘networks’ of relationships online are really more like hub-and-spokes arrangements. Multiplexity is a critical factor in truly knowing a person. Dunbar’s number is a suggested limit to the number of stable relationships the human brain is capable of maintaining, where not only each person is known but also *how* they relate to one another – as has been the case in communities since the dawn of time. It is usually set around 150.<sup>8</sup> Our online connections typically far exceed this number.

Anonymity, which is the default in social media, diminishes multiplexity. Such anonymity can be useful. Anonymous communication is a prerequisite for freedom of speech, which is an important brake on the accumulation and abuse of power; anonymous bloggers can provide critical commentary on sensitive issues without their safety being threatened. Whistleblowers frequently rely on anonymity to remain safe from those they seek to bring to account.

There are numerous occasions in the Bible where anonymity is employed – including for nefarious purposes (e.g. Saul and the Witch of Endor, 1 Samuel 28). In the context of social media, the web offers many temptations and anonymity facilitates engagement with these – including ‘different types of online crime – trolling, racial [and] homophobic abuse, sexting, revenge pornography’, which were unimaginable 30 years ago.<sup>9</sup> However, the Bible appears to be more interested in the integrity of an anonymous person than the fact of their disguised identity. The most famous cases of anonymity in the Bible are provided by Jesus himself, perhaps by the tomb to Mary Magdalene (John 20:15–16) and certainly on the

road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). Anonymity is sometimes desirable, such as when giving to charity (Matthew 6:1–4).

### 4 Parity: use of power

Any form of technology involves a change in the dynamics of power. The development of the first tools conveyed new abilities upon their users (consider the ‘Dawn of Man’ sequence from Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*). The benefits of fire or the wheel for farming and warfare are obvious. Technology always brings some value to the user and power over those who do not possess it.

The Philistines restricted ironworking by the Israelites because it gave them an advantage in warfare (1 Samuel 13:19). A key historical development in communications technology was the development of the alphabet. The differences between the typical uses of the populist alphabetic system and elitist syllabic and pictographic systems are striking.

The kings and priests of ancient Sumer wanted writing to be used by professional scribes to record numbers of sheep owed in taxes, not by the masses to write poetry and hatch plots. As the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss put it, ancient writing’s main function was ‘to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings.’ Personal uses of writing by nonprofessionals came only much later, as writing systems grew simpler and more expressive.<sup>10</sup>

The adoption of the alphabet by the Israelites (amongst others) over more complex writing systems used by the Egyptians and Canaanite people opened the possibility of vastly higher literacy rates and access to writing outside of the bureaucratic class. In Egypt, the elite cadre of priests who

were the administrators for Pharaoh’s kingdom were the only ones with the time to master the complex system of hieroglyphics. One of the implications of the Israelite system was that ordinary people could read and write the Torah.

There is a direct parallel in social media. The availability of information is analogous to the impact of the printing press which, amongst other things, democratised access to the Bible. Social media is a technology of the people. At

the same time, it can be used to gather information by any well-resourced organisation motivated to do so. It can also be manipulated. The Chinese government routinely tracks and censors social media and, even more insidiously, covertly directs conversations online.<sup>11</sup>

The ability to connect with others can have profound consequences for our spiritual freedom – and for the freedom of those with whom we are in relationship. Social media-based church communities are a good example of this.<sup>12</sup> It also has implications for political freedoms. Decentralisation of power is a key principle in the Bible, something God built

The levelling effect that the web and social media have on otherwise unaccountable authorities are aligned with the biblical concerns about concentration of power.

8 [www.cnet.com/news/sorry-facebook-friends-our-brains-cant-keep-up/](http://www.cnet.com/news/sorry-facebook-friends-our-brains-cant-keep-up/)

9 See [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36042718](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36042718)

10 Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Chatto & Windus, 1997, p.235.

11 [www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/05/22/479057698/study-chinas-government-fabricates-about-488-million-social-media-posts-every-ye](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/05/22/479057698/study-chinas-government-fabricates-about-488-million-social-media-posts-every-ye)

12 Although these may be far from ideal compared to congregations that meet face-to-face, they do offer fellowship and teaching for those who would otherwise be unable to attend through illness, disability or persecution.

into the Israelites' structures of government and justice<sup>13</sup> after their experiences as slaves in Egypt – and reflected in the idea of Subsidiarity in Catholic Social Teaching. We can conclude that the levelling effect that the web and social media have on otherwise unaccountable authorities are aligned with the biblical concerns about concentration of power. This has broader implications, since the nature of a country's government plays a key role in guaranteeing its citizens' religious freedoms, or otherwise – China and Iran being obvious examples.

#### 5 Commonality: shared purpose

The internet and social media make it easy to find and share a huge amount of information extremely quickly. The web is a pool of talent and expertise waiting to be tapped. If we need to find people who share our goals and values, there is a good chance they will be online somewhere. The borderless nature of the internet has enabled many Christians in closed countries or remote areas to join communities, find teaching materials and even attend online churches.



But there are downsides to commonality, and in particular the inward-looking commonality of some internet communities. The web has turbocharged consumerism: the idea that the world should be shaped around my needs and desires, and that I express myself through the choices I take.<sup>14</sup> Everything is subject to this tendency (including sexual relationship, as evidenced by the popularity of instant-dating apps). Consumerism tells us our identity is to be found in what we consume, and everything is subject to the 'valorisation of choice', including our faith and our closest relationships. It is a mindset that is diametrically opposed to contentment and to submitting to God's authority. It also overlooks the fact that the huge power usage of the data centres that support social media companies like Facebook and Twitter mean that these 'free' services have environmental costs.

Consumerism also encourages us to seek out people like

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ourselves and opinions like our own. The algorithms used by the networks reinforce this. The effect is that debate is stifled; social media can be an echo chamber that promotes disconnect from other sections of society (Brexit providing the perfect example – many people were stunned that anyone could hold the opposite view). Social networks like Facebook can be highly influential, since their algorithms determine the news that appears in our feeds. Whether or not the 'trends' are actively shaped as a matter of policy, as some critics have argued,<sup>15</sup> they can never be value-free.

#### Application: social media is the message

Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan coined the term 'The medium is the message', by which he meant that delivery mechanism and format strongly influences how content is perceived.

McLuhan went so far as to suggest that 'the "content" of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.'<sup>16</sup>

Whilst this position may seem extreme, the nature of the medium can also be extreme: consider the fact that Twitter forces users into communicating with a maximum of 140 characters, or Vine with six-second videos. The pervasive nature of social media means that it is easy to be uncritical about it. A key prerequisite for informing our engagement with it is therefore awareness of the impacts and the ability to make deliberate decisions – and, as Kranzberg's observation suggests, 'social media' is not a homogenous category to which we can give a one-size-fits-all response.

There are several questions it is worth asking about different social networks before we engage with them further.

- What is the vision of the good life inherent in this platform?
- What kind of behaviour, attitudes and thought processes does it foster in you and others?
- Does it have features or norms that are prone to harmful misuse?

Some broad areas for application include:

#### Discern relationship vs interaction

The ability to connect with other people, wherever they are around the world – and, thanks to translation software, sometimes even regardless of language – evokes an image of an almost pre-Babel world. It has the capacity to draw us closer together by emphasising our shared humanity over any differences of nationality or accidents of geography. Social media has made the world a smaller place and helped many people to re-establish the idea of community, albeit in redefined form. It serves as a reminder that 'From one man

<sup>13</sup> Deut. 16:18–20; 17:14–20.

<sup>14</sup> See David McLroy, *Infinite Choice, Cambridge Papers*, Vol.22 no.3, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> <https://next.ft.com/content/5c68e88e-18e6-11e6-bb7d-ee563a5a1cc1>

<sup>16</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, MIT Press, 1964, p18.



he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.’ (Acts 17:26) However, we often overreach ourselves by trying to maintain too many relationships (see Dunbar, above), almost as if we are trying to appropriate a divine characteristic. Limiting this number enables more meaningful relationship with each.

As McLuhan suggests, the medium makes an enormous difference to the *way* we engage with content and people. Twitter, with its 140-character message limit, is not suited for in-depth discussions. Used on its own, it tends to reduce debate to soundbites. However, it can be a good way to make contact with people or to keep track of developments. Twitter has become a valuable source of breaking news from citizen journalists. Many situations have been covered from the ground in a way that mainstream media outlets cannot or do not. These include unfolding terrorist attacks such as the Boston Marathon bombings, and news of protests such as the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Revolution.

#### *Guarding our hearts and minds*

For all the benefits offered by social media, there are serious pitfalls. By analogy with the Parable of the Sower, social media can be the thorns that choke the new crops. Studies have shown that so-called multi-tasking probably doesn't exist. Instead, our attention quickly flits between topics, undermining our ability to concentrate on one thing. 'A 2009 Stanford study concluded that people who were incessantly plugged into the Internet were "suckers for irrelevancy... The high multi-taskers are always drawing from all the information in front of them. They can't keep things separate in their minds.'" At a fundamental level, this distractibility compromises our humanity. The minds of chronic media multi-taskers do not function as well as they could. 'When they're in situations where there are multiple sources of information coming from the external world or emerging out of memory, they're not able to filter out what's not relevant to their current goal... That failure to filter means they're slowed down by

that irrelevant information.'<sup>17</sup>

The philosopher Martin Buber wrote that the 'I-Thou'<sup>18</sup> relationship is paramount. God is the unifying context for all human relationship. It is not necessary to go so far as Buber, who argues that every encounter with the world or other people necessarily involves a meeting with God, to see that compromising our ability to relate by sensitising the mind to distraction undermines our capacity to love. If we cannot be silent and at ease with ourselves, this has implications for our ability to pray, worship and engage with our faith. A recent BBC article highlighted the problem of couples who have spent 'so much time communicating via text and social media that they have forgotten how to talk', and who now 'don't have the language to communicate feelings'.<sup>19</sup> The emphasis on the self and personal image leads instead to an 'I-I' relationship that can border on the idolatrous. We can also encourage others to interact with a fantasy or a fabricated version of ourselves – a highly distorted idea of relationship.

#### *Be good stewards of time*

If 'the medium is the message', social media encourages us to engage with the platform, not primarily its content. There will always be new messages; it is the medium *itself* that can be addictive. This not only impacts our ability to concentrate. Our connected culture means we rather need to find more and more time to manage the endless flood of content. Some of this is spillover from work, which is no longer confined to the office or standard nine-to-five hours. Some is leisure or merely work-like; there is an irony that so many of us spend our work day in front of a computer screen, then come home and relax by staring at another series of screens. Either way, this inevitably detracts from our time with our families, particularly at the weekends.

The Bible warns us to use our time wisely (Ephesians 5:15–16). The day of rest, a sign of the covenant with Yahweh, was viewed as so important that working on the Sabbath could be punishable by death (Numbers 15:32–36). Not only working but causing another person or even animal to work was forbidden (Deuteronomy 5:12–15). The reason given is because 'you were slaves in Egypt'. God delivered the Israelites from slavery under Pharaoh, a situation in which they had no physical, financial or spiritual freedom. Working on the Sabbath was a self-imposed return to slavery. It did not simply represent ingratitude; it was a form of idolatry. That is ultimately the spiritual danger posed by social media: that it almost subconsciously takes precedence over everything else in our lives, faith included. The rise in weekend working and the now-common concept of the 'working holiday' show the degree to which we have accepted this as a normal part of life. There is a growing conversation around employees' 'right to disconnect' outside of office hours. France has

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17 <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/august24/multitask-research-study-082409.html>

18 Martin Buber, *Ich und Du*, 1927, translated as *I and Thou*, 1937.

19 [www.bbc.com/news/uk-36373299](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-36373299)

recently passed legislation around this, recognising the problem of stress and the threat to family relationships.<sup>20</sup> A series of German companies including Volkswagen and BMW have stopped delivering work messages during evenings and weekends.<sup>21</sup> Recognising the negative impact on their relationships and faith, many people have found a social media fast helpful, enabling them to re-establish their priorities. Disconnecting regularly is an important way of drawing a line in the sand and protecting our hearts and minds.

### *Engage actively and outwardly*

A key question to answer is what *kind* of engagement a platform prompts. To differing degrees they encourage us to be passive consumers of text, images and videos, rather than actively engaging with the people behind these updates. This consumerisation of relationship can establish harmful patterns for other relationships and for our faith, and we may have to make a conscious decision to change the way we relate to a social network and its users to prevent that. Rather than creating an echo chamber for ourselves, we might challenge ourselves by seeking out, or at least not marginalising, opinions that are different to our own, actively seeking to understand other political and religious ideas rather than only connect with people who share our outlook.

Both anecdotal evidence and empirical studies have shown that people feel pressure to present their best side in photos and updates uploaded to social media, portraying a carefully-tailored persona, and that the effect is often to ‘trigger feelings of envy, misery and loneliness’ in other users.<sup>22</sup> ‘The most common cause of Facebook frustration came from users comparing themselves socially to their peers, while the second most common source of dissatisfaction was “lack of attention” from having fewer comments, likes and general feedback compared to friends.’<sup>23</sup> Fostering this kind of dissatisfaction is at odds with the Bible’s warnings about envy, and Paul’s exhortation to be content in all circumstances (Philippians 4).

In all of our engagement with social media there is the challenge to be outward looking, focusing on others and on developing relationships with them, rather than looking inwards and using social media as a means to boost our own self-esteem or sense of identity. ‘Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.’ (Philippians 4:12)

### Conclusion

Social media platforms are expressions of a new technology and inevitably reflect the values of their creators and users. In enabling us to communicate more effectively, social media holds out the possibility of living in better relationship with each other – more direct and open, more just, better informed, more human – and, from this context, with God. However, its misuse risks making us less human, less perfect reflections of the image of the Creator. As relational beings, we take to these new means of communicating instinctively; as fallen beings, we are prone to acting in ways that damage our closest relationships. Moreover, the pervasiveness of communications technologies means the effects can be hard to discern and change. At its worst, there is something chaotically Babel-like about social media; at its best, there is something pre-Babel-like about its ability to transcend national and cultural boundaries.



Guy Brandon, a guest contributor to *Cambridge Papers*, is the Senior Researcher for the Jubilee Centre. His book *Digitally Remastered: Reclaiming your virtual self* is available from Muddy Pearl.<sup>24</sup>

20 [www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-36249647](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-36249647)

21 [www.dw.com/en/banning-e-mail-after-work/a-17445387](http://www.dw.com/en/banning-e-mail-after-work/a-17445387)

22 Sherry Turkle has extensively explored the links between increased connectivity and loneliness. See her TED talk at [www.ted.com/talks/sherry\\_turkle\\_alone\\_together](http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together), and her book *Alone Together* [www.alonetogetherbook.com/](http://www.alonetogetherbook.com/).

23 <http://healthland.time.com/2013/01/24/why-facebook-makes-you-feel-bad-about-yourself/>

24 [www.muddypearl.com](http://www.muddypearl.com).

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