

EDITORIAL

Social networking has come into its own. TIME Magazine chose Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, as its Man of the Year 2010. Even 83 year-old Pope Benedict weighed in on social networks in a message with the ambitious title, “Truth, proclamation and authenticity of life in the digital age.” And sites such as Twitter and Facebook played a pivotal role in galvanizing the opposition to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s 30-year regime in recent weeks. However, not all is well in the Age of Facebook. An editorial in USA Today declared 2010 “The Year We Stopped Talking,” lamenting, “Americans are more connected than ever—just not in person.”

While Americans are interconnected at unprecedented levels—93% now use cell phones or other wireless forms of communication—the connectivity revolution has engendered its fair share of social *angst*. Social networking has changed the way we relate to others to such a significant extent that our private and professional lives stand in urgent need of reassessment. At least, this is the contention of Richard Harper, principal researcher in socio-digital systems at Microsoft Research in Cambridge, England and author of *Texture: Human Expression in the Age of Communications Overload*.

Sherry Tuttle, Director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self in Cambridge, Massachusetts, agrees. In her book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, she observes, “We’ve come to confuse continual connectivity with making real connections.” While we’re always “on” for everyone, we often fail to have—or take—the time for conversations that count.

Pope Benedict, in his above-mentioned message, concurs. While the new media offers “a great opportunity,” the pontiff, as reported in a *New York Times* editorial “Pope Weighs in on Social Networks” (Jan. 24, 2011), warns of “the risks of depersonalization, alienation, self-indulgence, and the dangers of having more virtual friends than real ones.” “It is important always to remember that virtual contact cannot and must not take the place of direct human contact with people at every level of our lives,” the pontiff wrote, urging users of social networks to ask themselves the question, “Who is my ‘neighbor’ in this new world?” We must avoid the dilemma of being perennially available online while being less and “less present to those whom we encounter in our everyday life.”

Appropriate cautions indeed. We’ve all seen people who were completely oblivious to their environment while being utterly engrossed in texting or handling one of the myriads of technological gadgets that seem to proliferate almost by the day. As the USA Today cover story rightly noted, “We can definitely no longer assume [if we ever could] that we have someone’s full attention when we’re physically with them.”

For this and other reasons, many are increasingly ambivalent toward the new technological landscape, or at least are recognizing the urgent need to set boundaries. One such person, Susan Maushart of Mattituck, New York, mother of teenagers ages 14, 15, and 18, chose to unplug for six months and to recount her experience in *The Winter of Our Disconnect: How Three Totally Wired Teenagers (and a Mother Who Slept With Her iPhone) Pulled the Plug on Their Technology and Lived to Tell the Tale*. A father of three teenagers myself, I can certainly appreciate Mrs. Maushart's valid concern, though her course of action strikes me as perhaps a bit extreme.

Yet what is one person's bane is another's dream come true. While it's certainly nice to be connected 24/7 (and at times even vital—in the wake of the Virginia Tech shooting, many universities have set up an emergency text message system that will inform students of any danger on campus), many continue to be hesitant toward the blessings of the brave new world we have irrevocably entered. Or is it just a generational issue? At least in part, this is almost certainly the case. Those who grew up in the age of the internet are adept at handling their BlackBerries, Kindles, and iPads will have a very different outlook on the connectivity revolution than those of us who still remember life without the internet or a cell phone.

There can be no doubt that social media represents a fundamental change in the way we communicate. The way we share information today is significantly different from times past. Instead of us having to go and search for information in a book or some other resource, information finds us via a Twitter feed, Facebook status, or countless other ways. Twitter is the way we learn, for example, about flooding in Nashville, an earthquake in Haiti, or a revolution about to unfold, whether around the corner or on the other side of the globe. Also, when purchasing a new product, booking a hotel room, or deciding where to go to college, we will generally search online and depend on other people's reviews.

But what about scholarship? Even here, the benefits of the new social media are considerable. We can access data more readily and communicate the gospel to more people and in many ways do so more effectively. Yet at the same time, I fear that social networking may have a tendency to work like gangrene, eating up massive amounts of valuable time that could otherwise be spent in productive research. This is one reason why I, for one, don't spend a whole lot of time on Facebook or similar sites. Perhaps I'm just a private person who has a hard time getting used to the idea that everybody needs to know everyone else's private business, no matter how trivial. Does anybody really care that I had pancakes for breakfast?

Not too long ago, CNN ran a special whose gist was that privacy as we know it is now dead. There is no more privacy. While this may be an exaggeration, who would disagree that our private sphere has significantly shrunk? "It's all good," the Zuckerbergs of this world retort. But is it? Or are there downsides to our personal lives being swallowed up into the public arena as well? And if so, how can we navigate the Scylla and Charybdis between a friendless, Facebook-free existence on the one hand and massive information overload on the other?

What is more, not only does social networking affect our time and privacy, it also shapes the way we think. Increasingly, we communicate via sound bites and more or less profound one-liners rather than in larger coherent forms of discourse. As a result, people may gradually be less and less able to think in terms of narrative, despite the fact that life—and all we say about it on Facebook or Twitter—is vitally interconnected. The challenge remains for us to develop a coherent world view and to be able to articulate more complex positions that are not easily reducible to 140 characters or less. Has the new social media fostered a disposition that is restless, if not scatterbrained, and increasingly inept at handling larger issues?

The implications for the serious scholar are apparent. As Michiko Kakutani observes in a very illuminating *New York Times* piece entitled “Texts Without Context” (March 21, 2010), with the new media, “More people are impatient to cut to the chase, and they’re increasingly willing to take the imperfect but immediately available product over a more thoughtfully analyzed, carefully created one. Instead of reading an entire news article, watching an entire television show or listening to an entire speech, growing numbers of people are happy to jump to the summary, the video clip, the sound bite—never mind if context and nuance are lost in the process; never mind if it’s our emotions, more than our sense of reason, that are engaged; never mind if statements haven’t been properly vetted and sourced.” Increasingly, the mode of research moves from thoughtful, sustained reading to digital scavenger hunts for usable scraps of information. No matter what your primary occupation, you will do well to ponder the many implications of the social media for engaging in research. If, in addition, you want to know what “cyberbalkanization” and “nicheification” are, and why this post-deconstruction age could spell “the end of authorship,” you’ll have to read the above-mentioned “Texts Without Context.”

A brave new world indeed. I’ll close with a few parting items to consider. First of all, heed Rule #1 for social networking: boundaries, boundaries, boundaries! Set boundaries for yourself and those under your care. To adapt one of our Lord’s sayings, “Social networking was made for humans, not humans for social networking.” On a positive note, are you and I taking advantage of all the relational and ministry opportunities that come with the new technology? Are we sufficiently media-savvy to speak God’s word to people in the social networking age in a way that reaches them where they are?

The bottom line is this: Social media is here to stay, for better or for worse. Prayerfully consider how you can make social networking work for you and—more importantly—for the Lord and his kingdom. In the ultimate analysis, social networking is what you and I make it. May God give us wisdom and discernment as we navigate the increasingly complex challenges and opportunities with which we are presented in this era of rapid and unprecedented change and may he have mercy on us all.

ANDREAS KÖSTENBERGER
EDITOR, *JETS*