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Social Media Can Improve our Ability to Connect Meaningfully – but Only If done Right

There are many different social media platforms to choose from, each with their own take of how to socialize. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter believe that socializing online is about keeping track of what people are doing in real life and commenting on those experiences. Platforms such as Reddit and most bulletin board forums believe in dividing out conversations on certain topics. Whereas IRC Chat and Discord believe that conversations should flow more naturally and go for a more accurate depiction of how conversation works in the real world. Still, there are others such as Snapchat that work completely differently than any other platform. In “Connected, but alone?”, Sherry Turkle makes the point that technology is preventing us from socializing in real life. She says “And what I’ve found is that, our devices, those little devices in our pockets are so psychologically powerful that they don’t only change what we do, but they change who we are.” Turkle points out some of the psychological effects social media can have on us. It is not social media in and of itself that causes people to be unable to socialize in the real world, instead, it is how the platform is layed out and how similar it seems to the real world. Platforms that more accurately reflect conversation in the real world and are less addicting can improve people’s ability to socialize, especially during these pandemic times.

Let's take a moment to look at the types of platforms we generally think of when we see social media. These are, of course, platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. In these platforms, people make "posts" and those "post" appear in other's "feeds". This enables other people to be able to see what their friends have been up to, and is very effective for simply allowing people to keep up with your life. However, these platforms are arguably the worst platforms. They do not encourage people to talk with each other at all. While "posts" have comment section, it is far from a genuine, natural conversation. Additionally, Twitter is the worst social media of all, because in addition to being this type of social media, it is addictive and encourages mob mentality, and the developers of Twitter knew exactly what they were creating when they tried to create it. Popular educational YouTube channel Kurzgesagt once ranted about Twitter. "Twitter is great at making itself feel somehow 'vital'… but Twitter is mostly talking to itself… it makes others feel more 'other' and pushes all the buttons that want to make us part of the ingroup of tribes… It is optimized for anger and generalizations that make us misrepresent the complexity of the world we live in… The only winning Twitter move is not to play." As you can see, these platforms are extremely addictive and do not accurately represent normal socialization. However, discussion is often more encouraged in bulletin board forums than these types of media.

The second type of social media is one that is less common nowadays, but used to be very popular: Bulletin Boards and Reddit. These are more of a middle-ground between the first type and the third type of social media. In these forums, while there are "posts", discussions are more encouraged. Some of them are just people trying to help other people, such as Stack Overflow, but I don't really consider those to be "social media". These platforms are often

subdivided into individual forums of subreddits. This ensures that all the people in a certain forum are interested in the same things. There is however one problem with these types of forums, they harbor mob mentality. They are often groups of people with similar opinions on things and if you disagree with them, then they won't like you. The one problem with these types of forums that makes them so addicting is that it's constantly a war for upvotes. People on Reddit call it "karma farming", where you makes posts not because they're good quality, but because you know people will upvote your post. It doesn't seem like it, but sometimes fake internet points can be extremely addictive. It makes you feel like you matter to people. Even when some of those people like everything. Additionally, as Clay Shirkey would tell you in "How Social Media can make History", it is very easy for forums such as Reddit to be able to have people gather together in order to make change in the world. Clay Shirkey said "As [An earthquake that happened in China] happened, people were texting and taking photos and videos and posting them on [social media]." The best example I can find is when Redditors got upset at Hedge Funds who were betting on GameStop dying, many of which had good memories of GameStop in the past. They all gathered together and decided to hurt the Hedge Funds by everyone collectively buying GameStop stock. This put a significant dent in Hedge Funds and gave more power back to the average investor. However, types of social media such as Discord and IRC Chat focus mainly on emulating a real conversation as much as possible.

Now, finally, for the good type of social media: Discord and IRC Chats. IRC Chats are not as common nowadays, most people switched to Skype and TeamSpeak in the late 2000's, and then to Discord in the mid 2010's, but these kinds of platforms are better at encouraging natural conversation. These platforms have "channels" or "chats" where an accurate simulation of an

actual conversation would take place. It feels like an extension of texting or just a big group chat, which is exactly what it is. I will point out, however, that larger Discord servers and IRC chats do often feel a bit like mob mentality, but that's only some. Generally, the smaller ones are the best, and are often the nicest servers you can be in. While some bots like Starboard exist, it's not the same as the upvotes you would get on Reddit or Facebook because it does not matter as for how many people will see your post. It will be here today and gone tomorrow as new messages pile up. Additionally, people see your messages instantly, instead of having to wait several hours just for a reply. To add onto all of this, Discord supports getting in voice channels with friends and then just talking normally. You can share your screen so your friends can see you, and then you can talk as if it were a completely normal conversation. Platforms like Discord most of the time do not have a detrimental effect on people's ability to have real-world conversations because they are so much like real-world conversation.

So what does this all mean? I believe that we should stop using "post-based" platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, limit our use to bulletin board platforms such as Reddit, and perform most of our socializing on Discord. Discord made the mistake back in the day of marketing mostly towards gamers, however, as most Discord users will tell you, there is almost nothing about Discord that is exclusive to gamers. In 2020, after the pandemic started, Discord finally gave in, and renamed the Discord motto to "Your Place to Talk", and made Discord open to everyone. Platforms like Discord bring us closer together, whereas platforms like Twitter tend to drive us apart. It's all in the design.

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