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Unsocial Media

by Bill Gill

(English 1101)

From the advent of agriculture to the scientific and industrial revolutions, inventions were few and far between but each invention was needed and practical; in other words, they were good things. Inventions like Alexander Graham Bell's telephone or Thomas Edison's light bulb made life better and easier for millions of people. Fast forward to today and we are drowning in technology. Maps have turned into GPS units. The record player, the telephone, and the television have slowly morphed into the iPhone. Virtually anything can be digitized in today's modern world. Even something as human as socializing is currently undergoing the process of being digitized through social media.

Many, including the author of "Social Networking, Social Good," Rebecca Thompson, claim that overall, the invention of social media was a good thing because it provides many services including offering "comfort" to those cannot find it in their real lives, eradicating the "distance between far flung friends," and contributing "to the creation of new knowledge" (254). However, despite the potential for these positive events to happen, overall, social media is more detrimental than beneficial because it encourages egocentrism, is taking place of actual real human conversations and interaction, and, most importantly of all, is a hotbed for clickbait articles.

Social media websites feed on narcissism. Twitter encourages users to share every thought or feeling they have, making them feel important or special. Facebook's timeline system operates in a way so that users will only see things they like most of the time. A 2012 study from Western Illinois University found that most narcissists are attracted to the amassing friends aspect of Facebook (Parker-Pope 16). The more recent Instagram, a social media company owned by Facebook, now provides a service solely based on users posting pictures, usually of themselves, for other people to like them and comment below. All of these aspects of social media are creating a false image that everything in the small world of the user is acceptable and most people care about the user, when that often could not be further from the truth. The most recent social media company that feeds on narcissism is Snapchat. In defense of the app, journalist Joel Stein claims in his 2017 *Time* magazine article, "What's It Worth to be Yourself Online? The Genius of Snapchat" that "Snapchat is the only [real] social media company" (32) because it focuses on the private interactions between friends, accompanied by pictures that can only be viewed for up to ten seconds before disappearing forever. He even refers to Snapchat as "a utility company for visual texting" (28). However, one aspect of the app Snapchat, called stories, requires the user to post a video or picture that any person added to a friend's list can see. But if Snapchat is just "visual texting" (Stein 28), a very private act, then what is the purpose of having a feature that operates exclusively in the public?

Most millennials (including myself) love music and attend concerts. The last time I went to a concert was when I saw Tame Impala at the University of Illinois at Chicago in the summer of 2016. As I stood there next to my friend Saul, basking in the sounds of Kevin Parker's psychedelic rock tunes and the overwhelming smell of illegal substances, I noticed that many members of the audience were standing with their phones in the air, making sure to film the entire concert and put it on their Snapchat story for all to see. I watched Saul do it. As much as I hate to admit it, even I committed this wicked sin. Were we recording it to save for later? Probably not. Was it to give our friends some insight to their experiences? Probably not (our real friends were probably next to us at the concert).

So why then? The only answer left is we did it to show off, to say with pictures and videos that we got to go to this concert and others did not. In short, to enlarge our (probably already oversized) egos.

Stories are not the only aspect of Snapchat that feed off narcissism. Evan Spiegel, co-founder and CEO of Snapchat claimed in a 2013 interview “we’re trying to create a place that is cognizant of that [the illusion of perfection created by other social media sites], where you can be in sweatpants, sitting eating cereal on a Friday night and that’s O.K” (Stein 30). So if the goal of Snapchat is to show the reality, to be the countermovement to sites like Facebook that show only the ideal version of the user, why do filters exist? One of the more popular filters is the dog filter, which basically gives the person in the photo a cute dog nose accompanied by an even cuter pair of dog ears. It cannot be a coincidence that a filter that covers the nose and has a tongue that stretches to cover the chin, two parts of the face many feel self-conscious about, is one of the most popular filters on Snapchat. Other filters distort other areas of the face and some, such as the ‘Butterfly Princess’ filter, make the user appear more beautiful and almost angelic. These filters, much like the catalog of perfect photos of a “vacation in Maui” (Stein 30) on Facebook, only serve to further imbed a false image of beauty, and thus, further enlarge the ego of the user.

Social media may get rid of “the distance between far-flung friends” (Thompson 254), but it also creates vast chasms between people who are in the same neighborhood, same class in school, or even right next to each other. I am currently a college student at my local community college. Since I have been in college, instead of talking to the people around me and building relationships, I spend most of my time with my nose buried deep in my phone, focused on Twitter or Instagram memes (internet jokes that go viral), especially when I have time to kill during classes. I also make sure to bring my headphones in order to bury any outside noise with the smooth sound of music, probably Lou Reed of the Velvet Underground belching lyrics about his quests to find heroin on the bustling streets of New York City. But, even if I do want to talk, I look up from my phone and see fifteen other faces buried in their screens. I swear sometimes it feels like I am surrounded by zombies, deathly afraid to look away from their phone screen in case they miss a second of whatever is happening anywhere but here. They are physically present but their consciousness is at Coachella, their eyes locked in on their surgically prepared celebrity hero, their pupils as wide dinner plates, their heart pumping like a punk rock drum beat as they begin to scream “Oh my god! It’s Kylie!”

But my generation, those born in the late 90’s (I was born in 1998), has only been exposed to social media for a short period of time; social media was not around during the early to mid 2000’s, our peak years of childhood socialization. The next generation’s social tendencies may prefer texting to talking, liking to compliments, and Facebook friends to real friends, and the distance online interaction provides because socializing is easier that way. Conversations have awkward pauses in them; they require thinking in the moment, and dealing with whatever judgments other people might have. Being a person is hard. Being a wall of text is easy.

Social media websites, especially Facebook, are hotbeds for clickbait articles. Clickbait travels on Facebook by sharing. Sometimes a user’s friend will share an article with an enticing but meaningless headline such as “Which Disney Character Are You?” (“Which”) or “6 Terrible Games Released in 2016 That Were Supposed to be Amazing” (Lyles). The user will click on the article, read whatever useless information it contains, and move on. Facebook will then assume the user liked the content of the article and show the user more of it. The point of clickbait (besides entertainment) is, according to Anna Escher and Anthony Ha of Techcrunch.com, to bring in “page views. Most sites use traffic numbers like page views or unique visitors to bill advertisers and measure their general success” (screen 2). The point of a clickbait article is to draw readers in with a catchy headline and then bombard them with ads. Companies (or scams) will then buy up those ad spots like cheap stock in order to increase their visibility as a product. For the content, just hire some young, aspiring author fresh out of some state university somewhere that can write inoffensive and

broad content, such as listicles, in order to retain readers and keep them coming back, thereby accumulating those precious page views.

This clickbait problem would be absolutely fine if it existed in a vacuum, but clickbait is all but destroying newspaper companies and professional, reliable journalism. “Increasingly, content isn’t created by journalists once employed by legacy media. It comes from freelancers, citizen journalists, bloggers, and vloggers. Freelancers are being hired while experienced, older journalists are laid off” (screen 2) claims Jeffrey Dvorkin, a professor of journalism at the University of Toronto, in a 2016 article for PBS. Afraid for their job security, many journalists turn to writing clickbait articles that play it safe and attract views. In “Why Click-Bait Will Be the Death of Journalism,” Dvorkin concludes that “one of the best qualities in the journalistic culture is skepticism. But when it comes to digital, skepticism has been replaced with unquestioning enthusiasm” (screen 4). Mindless amusement makes money, asking questions does not; in other words, clickbait makes money, real journalism does not. This trend towards entertainment and clickbait over real journalism is detrimental because it deprives the public of real and pertinent news that they may not want, but they need. For all its benefits social media is cancerous in that its narcissism can metastasize, making it harder for people to actually talk to one another, creating an expressway where misinformation can commute.

I hate social media and yet, I still use it every day. I criticize the zombies around me, but like them, I am caught in the vice of social media. And, eventually, we zombies will take over. According to Nielsen, Snapchat “is used by roughly half of 18-to-34-year-olds” and “those who use it daily open the app 18 times a day for a total of nearly 30 minutes” (Stein 28). Social media apps, such as Snapchat, can be more addicting than heroin. I would wager there are more brain cells left in Keith Richards’ brain than there are teens without Twitter accounts. Good, bad, or evil, social media is like a Japanese bullet train that cannot be stopped and something we will all have to deal with in the post millennium world, whether we like it or not.

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