

Social Media

Kerby Anderson assesses how social media's influence is changing our brains and the way we think. He also provides an overview of censorship within social media.

The influence of social media in our society has increased dramatically in the last decade. This leads to two very important questions. First, how are the various forms of social media and these digital devices affecting us? Second, should we respond to the documented examples of censorship on these social media platforms?

Social Media Influence

More than a decade ago, social scientists and social commentators expressed concern about how the Internet in general and social media in particular was influencing us. Nicholas Carr raised this question in an *Atlantic* article entitled "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" He observed that "Over the past few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory." He believed this came from using the Internet and searching the web with Google.

He later went on to write a book with the arresting title, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. He surveyed brain research that helped to explain why we don't read as much and why it is so hard to concentrate. The Internet and social media are retraining our brains. He says, "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski."

A developmental psychologist at Tufts University put it this way. "We are not only what we read. We are how we read." The style of reading on the Internet puts "efficiency" and

“immediacy” above other factors. Put simply, it has changed the way we read and acquire information.

You might say that would only be true for the younger generation. Older people are set in their ways. The Internet could not possibly change the way the brains of older people download information. Not true. The 100 billion neurons inside our skulls can break connections and form others. A neuroscientist at George Mason University says: “The brain has the ability to reprogram itself on the fly, altering the way it functions.”

The proliferation of social media has also begun to shorten our time of concentration. Steven Kotler made this case in his *Psychology Today* blog, “How Twitter Makes You Stupid.” He once asked the author of the best-selling book why he called it the “8 Minute Meditation.” The author told him that eight minutes was the length of time of an average segment of television. He reasoned that “most of us already know exactly how to pay attention for eight minutes.”

Steven Kotler argues that Twitter was reducing the time of concentration to 140 words (back when that was the word limit). He showed how Twitter was constantly tuning “the brain to reading and comprehending information 140 characters at a time.” He concluded that “[I]f you take a Twitter-addicted teen and give them a reading comprehension test, their comprehension levels will plunge once they pass the 140 word mark.”

Not only is there a problem with concentration; there is a problem with distraction. A study at the University of Illinois found that if an interruption takes place at a natural breakpoint, then the mental disruption is less. If it came at a less opportune time, the user experienced the “where was I?” brain lock.

Another problem is what is called “continuous partial

attention.” People who use mobile devices often use their devices while they should be paying attention to something else. Psychologists tell us that we really aren’t multitasking, but rather engage in rapid-fire switching of attention among tasks. It is inevitable they are going to miss key information if part of their focus is on their digital devices.

There is also the concern that social media and digital devices are reducing our creativity. Turning on a digital device and checking social media when you are “doing nothing” replaces what we used to do in the days before these devices were invented. Back then, we called it “daydreaming.” That is when the brain often connects unrelated facts and thoughts. You have probably had some of your most creative ideas while shaving, putting on makeup, or driving. That is when your brain can be creative. Checking e-mail and social media sites reduces daydreaming.

These new media platforms present a challenge to us as Christians. As we use these new forms of media, we should always be aware of their influence on us. They can easily conform us to the world (Romans 12:2). Therefore, we should make sure that we are not taken captive (Colossians 2:8) by the false philosophies of the world.

Christians should strive to apply the principle set forth in Philippians 4:8. “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

A wise Christian will use discernment when approaching the various social media platforms. They provide lots of information and connect us with people around the world. But we should also guard against the worldly influence that is also promoted on many of these platforms.

Social Media Censorship

Big Tech companies have been censoring content for many years. Many years ago, the National Religious Broadcasters began monitoring censorship on these social media platforms through their John Milton Project for Religious Free Speech. Even back then, their report concluded that “The free speech liberty of citizens who use the Internet is nearing a crisis point.”

A recent Senate hearing provided lots of additional examples. Senator Marsha Blackburn asked why her pro-life ad was pulled during the 2018 campaign because Twitter deemed it “inflammatory.” It is worth noting that she did receive an apology from the executive who added that they made a “mistake on your ad.” Senator Ted Cruz pointed to a Susan B. Anthony List ad that was banned. It had a picture of Mother Teresa with her quote: “Abortion is profoundly anti-woman.” At the top of the poster in the committee room was the word: CENSORED.

A number of commentators (Laura Loomer, Milo Yiannopoulos, Alex Jones) have been banned from Facebook and Instagram. Steven Crowder’s YouTube channel has been demonetized. Nearly two-dozen PragerU videos have been slapped with a restricted label on YouTube. The list goes on and on.

Big tech does control much of the media world. Google controls 90% of worldwide search, 75% of smartphone operating systems, 67% of desktop browser, and 37% of digital advertising. Add to this other platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube that also have a profound influence. At the Senate hearing, Ted Cruz noted that these big tech companies “are larger and more powerful than Standard Oil was when it was broken up” and “larger and more powerful than AT&T when it was broken up.” But does that mean government should get involved?

Those who are advocating government intervention make the case that “platform access is a civil right.” The argument is that

private companies are actually violating the civil rights of Americans in the same way that preventing someone to speak in a public park would be a violation. They argue that the big tech companies are a monopoly. And they call for federal and state regulation of these social media platforms arguing that the Supreme Court has argued in the past that government cannot restrict your access to the public square.

The problem with that argument is two-fold. First, these big tech companies are private companies not the government. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube platforms are private property and not the public square. We may not always like what they do, but they are privately owned technology companies and not the federal government, which is governed by the First Amendment.

Second, these companies are protected by a section of the 1996 Communications Decency Act that keeps them from being exposed to potentially crippling liability for something posted on their platform. Some politicians have called for changing that legal protection, but Congress seems unlikely to do anything like that in the near future.

Many conservatives are wary of having the government get involved in patrolling social media platforms. They remind us of the 1949 FCC Fairness Doctrine. This regulation was supposed to provide an opportunity for media outlets to provide content that was fair, honest, and balanced. Talk radio and other forms of media exploded once the Fairness Doctrine was removed. In most cases, government regulation of the media hurt conservative voices more than helped them.

Even if government were to regulate content on social media platforms, it is worth mentioning that the major tech companies would probably have lots of influence. Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg would have a place at the table as government drafted various media regulations. It is likely that company and many others might even help craft regulations that would

protect them from future competitors. We have seen this picture before in other instances when government intervened.

Some have even suggested that we close our social media accounts. If you don't like the way the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* reports stories or provides commentary from people on your side, you don't have to subscribe to those newspapers. If you don't like how MSNBC or Fox News covers stories, you don't have to tune to that TV network. Media outlets are already choosing what to print or broadcast. Social media platforms are no different.

Sam Sweeney has this advice: "Delete your Facebook, yesterday. Don't get your news from Twitter. The issues of free speech on social media will no longer matter to you. They don't matter to me. I've made a decision not to subjugate myself to the whims of our new overloads."

I think most of us want to keep our social media accounts because of the benefit we receive. But I also realize that in light of what we have discussed in this article, many will decide to follow his advice and drop one or more of these social media accounts. We leave that decision to you.

Additional Resources

Kerby Anderson, *Arts, Media, and Culture* (Cambridge, OH: Christian House Publishing, 2016).

Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *Atlantic*, July/August 2008.

David French, "Social-Media Censorship is the Product of Culture and Commerce," *National Review*, 6 June 2019.

Stephen Kotler, "How Twitter Makes Your Stupid," *Psychology Today*, 15 May 2009.

Jessica Melugin, "Conservative who want Facebook, other social media regulated should think twice," *Foxnews.com*, 11 June

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Sam Sweeney, "Close Your Social-Media Accounts," *National Review*, 10 June 2019.

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Mind, Soul, and Neuroethics

Neuroscience is the next frontier for research, and Kerby Anderson urges Christians to pay attention to these findings and provide a biblical perspective to the research and an ethical framework for its application.

Let me begin with a question. Imagine that our medical technology has advanced enough that we can transplant a human brain. If we exchanged your brain with that of another person, would you wake up in your body with someone else's thoughts and memories? Or would you wake up in the other person's body?

Or consider the following questions concerning brain research:

- Scientists are beginning to work on a "smart pill" that would increase your memory and intelligence. If such a pill existed, who should take it?
- Scientists are working to develop brain fingerprinting to reveal a person's knowledge of events. If perfected, should these brain scans be used like polygraph tests to detect if people are lying?
- Pharmaceutical companies are working to develop chemicals that block the formation of memories. If perfected, should these pills also be used to erase memories that people don't want to have?

- Areas of the brain can be stimulated or suppressed by placing a device over the scalp. Should doctors use these devices to control your brain?

These are just a few of the questions being raised in a relatively new ethical field of discussion known as neuroethics.

In the past few years, neuroscience has been making discoveries about the human brain at an incredible rate of speed. Advances in neuroscience and imaging methods have made it possible to observe the brain more directly. And advances in neurosurgery have also made it possible to intervene more precisely and effectively.

This new arena of neuroethics is beginning to deal with the hard questions about our rapidly growing knowledge of the human brain and our ethical and social responsibilities concerning this new information. Doctors, scientists, lawyers, politicians, and theologians are all interested in neuroethics. But as you can see from the above examples, the implications of these concerns should extend to all of us since we will ultimately be affected by the moral and legal decisions concerning neuroscience.

In developing a Christian perspective on neuroethics, we should begin with a proper understanding of the mind and brain. Nearly all scientific investigation begins with the *a priori* assumption that we are material, not spiritual. Thus, scientists assume there is only a brain and not an immaterial mind. Put another way, they assume there is only a body and not a soul.

Dualism

Are we merely a brain or are we both brain and mind? This is a fundamental question in science, philosophy, and theology. New advances in science seem to be challenging the notion that we

are both mind and brain.

Most Christians are Cartesian dualists in that they believe that the soul inhabits the body. The name Cartesian dualism comes from the philosopher René Descartes who four hundred years ago argued that identity and thought were distinct. He is famous for the phrase, “I think, therefore I am.” In other words, the fact that he could think about himself showed that there was something distinct from him. He was doing something with his brain, but he was also distinct from his brain because he was having thoughts.

A quarter century ago, Probe Ministries published a book that showed that we are both mind and brain. The book, *The Mysterious Matter of Mind*, by Dr. Arthur C. Custance presented experimental evidence that led scientists to conclude that the mind is more than matter and more than a mere by-product of the brain.[{1}](#)

One of the most famous findings in this field involved the research of Wilder Penfield. Although he was born in the U.S., he did most of his research in Canada and was later celebrated as “the greatest living Canadian.”

In 1961, Penfield reported a dramatic demonstration of the existence of a mind that is separate from the brain. He found that the mind acted independently of the brain under controlled experimental conditions. His subject was an epileptic patient who had part of the brain exposed. When Penfield used an electrode to stimulate a portion of the cortex, here is what he reported:

When the neurosurgeon applies an electrode to the motor area of the patient's cerebral cortex causing the opposite hand to move, and when he asks the patient why he moved the hand, the response is: “I didn't do it. You made me do it.” . . . It may be said that the patient thinks of himself as having an existence separate from his body.

Once when I warned a patient of my intention to stimulate the motor area of the cortex, and challenged him to keep his hand from moving when the electrode was applied, he seized it with the other hand and struggled to hold still. Thus, one hand, under the control of the right hemisphere driven by the electrode, and the other hand, which he controlled through the left hemisphere, were caused to struggle against each other. Behind the “brain action” of one hemisphere was the patient’s mind. Behind the action of the other hemisphere was the electrode.[{2}](#)

This experiment (and others like it) demonstrates that there is both a mind and brain. Mind is more than just merely a by product of the brain.

Neuroscience: Opportunities and Challenges

Neuroscience has been making discoveries about the human brain at an incredible rate of speed, and this provides both new opportunities and major ethical challenges. For example, existing brain imaging methods provide scientists with some very powerful tools to discover the structure and function of the human brain. These tools can detect various brain abnormalities. They can also help in the diagnosis of various neurological disorders.

Scientists have also been using these brain imaging machines to study emotions, language, and even our perceptions. It is possible that eventually these machines could even be used to read our thoughts and memories.

Scientists who have developed a brain fingerprinting machine believe they will be able to determine a person’s knowledge of events. By measuring electrical activity within the brain, they can see the response of a person to certain stimuli

(words, sounds, pictures). Analysis of these responses might be helpful in various investigations.

Sometimes crime investigators use a polygraph machine to detect lies. But these devices are not completely foolproof. Scientists believe they might be able someday to develop accurate readings from functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to determine whether a person is telling the truth.

What are the implications of this? Is it possible that one day people who are suspected of a crime will be required to submit to a brain scan? Could brain scans be used to determine high-risk employees, potential criminals, even terrorists? For now, this is mere speculation, but neuroscience may force us to deal with these questions in the future.

Some have even speculated that measurements from these machines could help in distinguishing true memories from false memories. In some experiments, certain areas of the brain appear to respond differently to true memories and false memories.

Could brain scans be used to predict certain neurological disorders? Scientists using fMRI have found that people with schizophrenia have different sizes of key brain structures (e.g., larger lateral ventricles, reduced hippocampus, etc.) than those people without this mental disorder. Many of the ethical questions already surrounding the use of genetic screening would no doubt surface with the application of brain scans that would screen for neurological disorders.

A related question in this growing field of neuroethics is the use of mood altering drugs. Psychopharmacology has already provided pills to treat depression, anxiety, and even attention deficit disorder. Future development in this area will no doubt yield other mood-altering and brain-altering drugs.

In the future, it might be possible to genetically engineer

drugs or even genetically engineer human beings to treat and even cure mental disorders. This same technology might also allow scientists to increase memory and perhaps even increase intelligence. For now, the idea of a smart pill is just science fiction. But what if we develop such a medicine? Who should get the pill? Under what conditions would it be administered? These are all questions for the twenty-first century in this growing field of neuroethics.

Erasing Memories

In the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, a couple (played by Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet) undergo a brain procedure that allows them to erase each other from their memories because their relationship has turned sour. The story develops when Joel discovers that his girlfriend, Clementine, has undergone a psychiatrist's experimental procedure which removes him from her mind. Joel then decides to undergo the same procedure. In the process, however, he rekindles his love for her.

Although the film is science fiction and essentially a thought experiment, erasing memories is something scientists are pursuing right now. They are already testing a pill that, when given after a traumatic event, seems to make resulting memories less intense. The pill appears to blunt memory formation and could be very useful as a treatment. For example, this pill could be used if a person experiences a horrible event (such as a rape or witness to a murder). It would also be helpful to those who have endured an earthquake, hurricane, or tsunami.

Doctors also believe that it would help victims of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This was a problem first recognized in the Vietnam War and a disorder diagnosed in men and women who have been serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those affected often experience mental symptoms (flashbacks) and

physical symptoms.

When a traumatic event occurs, the brain is flooded with stress hormones (such as adrenalin) that actually store these memories in different ways than the manner in which memories are normally preserved. These memories seem to be stored in our brain's hard drive, and therefore seem nearly impossible to erase.

The new pills are a class of drugs known as beta blockers which can cross the blood-brain barrier. They can actually dull the impact of the memory formation by getting to the place where stress hormones work to form these traumatic memories. Scientists believe that they can not only blunt the impact of these memories, they might even prevent PTSD. Some physicians believe it might be possible to cure PTSD by triggering these memories and then administering this new drug to eliminate them.

Not everyone is excited about the prospects of erasing memories. Already we have a variety of drugs that can alter a person's personality. Antidepressants and tranquilizers are used by millions of people every day. Antipsychotic drugs are used to treat people with such mental disorders as schizophrenia. Erasing a person's memory with certain drugs would certainly change their personality. Would that change always be for the better?

When researchers working in the area of erasing memories were asked to testify before the President's Council on Bioethics, there was deep concern. Chairman Leon Kass argued that painful memories serve a purpose and are part of the human experience.

Biblical Perspective

Advances in the field of neuroscience certainly raise new ethical dilemmas for the twenty-first century. But they also challenge the biblical understanding of human nature.

Neuroscience is beginning to explain a great deal of human behavior by mapping the human brain. Scientists are locating regions that influence personality, character, and even spirituality. Does this challenge the concept of Cartesian dualism? Can we explain mind as merely a by-product of brain?

One researcher in this field thinks the research does challenge this biblical foundation. She says you “can still believe in what Arthur Koestler called ‘the ghost in the machine’.” But she concludes that “as neuroscience begins to reveal the mechanisms of personality, character, and even sense of spirituality, this Cartesian line of interpretation becomes strained. If these are all features of the machine, why have a ghost at all? By raising questions like this, it seems likely that neuroscience will pose a far more fundamental challenge to religion than evolutionary biology.”{3}

So if you think evolution has been a challenge to Christianity, just wait until the findings of neuroscience reach the society at large. There are large and significant issues that need to be addressed. So what is a Christian perspective on these issues of mind/brain and body/soul?

First, the Bible teaches that when the soul leaves the body, the body is dead (James 2:26). And if the soul returns to the body, the whole person comes back to life (Luke 8:55). This dual nature of the body and soul is documented in many passages of Scripture (Matt. 26:41; Rom. 8:10; 1 Cor. 5:5; 6:17, 20; 7:34; 2 Cor. 7:1; Gal. 5:17).

Second, the New Testament also talks about the resurrection of the body, and Paul elaborates on the nature of this body (1 Cor. 15:35-44). We have the most complete picture of this resurrection body by observing what the Bible tells us about Jesus Christ after His resurrection. Paul tells us this is the body we will have (Phil. 3:20-21).

This resurrection body of Jesus Christ was able to freely pass through physical barriers (walls, locked doors). But it could also be examined for purposes of identification. It is a body that is able to communicate with the physical world (can be seen, heard, felt). Likewise, we can anticipate that our bodies will be able to share a meal and then disappear only to reappear in another location. It will also be a body that can act upon the physical world by moving objects, going for a walk, even starting a fire.

The Bible teaches that we are more than matter. We are both body and soul, mind and brain. Neuroscience is the next frontier for research, and Christians must pay attention to these findings and provide a biblical perspective to the research and an ethical framework for its application.

Notes

1. Arthur C. Custance, *The Mysterious Matter of Mind* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Probe, 1980).
2. Wilder Penfield, in the "Control of the Mind" Symposium, held at the University of California Medical Center, San Francisco, 1961, quoted in Arthur Koestler, *Ghost in the Machine* (London: Hutchison Publishing Group, 1967), 203-4.
3. Martha J. Farah, "Neuroethics," Op-Ed, American Medical Association, www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/12727.html.