

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

2019.

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

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New Media and Society

Kerby Anderson provides an overview of the ups and downs of the new media such as Facebook and Twitter, and their impact on us.

How is the new media affecting the way we think and the way we interact with others in society? I want to look at the impact the Internet, social networks, and portable media devices are having on our world.

Rachel Marsden doesn't think it is positive. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* she says:

Spare me the stories of your "genius" tech-savvy child who can name every country on Google Earth, or how, because of your iPhone, BlackBerry and three cell phones, you juggle 20 tasks at once and never miss any business—even at 4 a.m., because you sleep with your portable devices. Does anyone care that technology is destroying social graces and turning people into rude jerks?[\[1\]](#)

She isn't the first to notice that the new technology and new mobile devices are changing the way we interact with others. And, as we will discuss later, they apparently are also changing the way we think, affecting everything from creativity to concentration.

Rachel Marsden wonders, “When did it become acceptable for technological interaction to supersede in-person communication?” I have news for her. It happened long before cell phones were invented. When I was a graduate student at Yale University, I noticed something odd about my academic advisor. Whenever the phone would ring, he felt he had to answer it. He could be advising me or we could be deep in the midst of a discussion of a research project. But if the phone rang, he stopped the conversation and answered the phone, staying on the phone until that conversation was over. I began to think that the only way I could ever have a sustained conversation with him would be to call him on the phone.

Of course, mobile devices make it even easier to ignore face-to-face interaction. Now the world revolves around the person who has instant access to others using these devices. Rebecca Hagelin says that narcissism has crept into our world. In 2006, *Time* magazine voted “You” as the “Person of the Year.” So much of media and advertising today is about indulging your fantasies.

Rebecca Hagelin is concerned about the impact this is having on our children. “Young people spend hours every day updating their Facebook pages, post and e-mail countless pictures of themselves, and plug their ears with music to create a self-indulgent existence shut-off from everyone around them.”[\[2\]](#)

While some of the impact is positive, much more should concern us and cause us to change our behavior.

The Internet and the Way You Think

Can the Internet change how you think? That was a question columnist Suzanne Fields asked recently.[\[3\]](#) If you go to Edge.org, you will notice that the question they pose for this year is slightly different. It is, “How is the Internet changing the way you think?” They pose this provocative

question because of the impact of computer chips, digitized information, and virtual reality on the way we think and how we receive information in this “collective high-tech electronic ecosystem for the delivery of information.”

I have also been wondering about the impact of the Internet and the new media on our thinking. Unlike Suzanne Fields, I wasn't wondering *if* the Internet was changing our thinking but *how* it is already changing the way we think. There were two reasons why I have been thinking about this.

First, look at the younger generation being raised on the Internet. If you haven't noticed, they think and communicate differently from previous generations. I have done radio programs and read articles about the millennial generation. They do think differently, and a large part of that is due to the Internet.

A second reason for my interest in this topic is an *Atlantic* article by Nicholas Carr entitled “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” He says, “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.”[\[4\]](#)

It's not that he believes his mind is going, but he notices that he isn't thinking the way he used to think and he isn't concentrating like he used to concentrate. “Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages.”

He believes this comes from using the Internet and searching the web with Google. And he gives not only his story, but he also gives many anecdotes and as well as some research to back up his perspective.

For example, a developmental psychologist at Tufts University explains, "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.

Now 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."[\[5\]](#)

The Internet does appear to be altering the way we read and think, but more research is needed to confirm if this true. If so, parents and educators need to take note of what is happening in our cyberworld.

BlackBerries, Twitter, and Concentration

Have portable media devices altered our ability to concentrate? That certainly seems to be the case. Nearly all of us have noticed that people with a BlackBerry sometimes seem distracted. And after they answer an e-mail, they seem to spend a few minutes trying to recollect their thoughts before they had the interruption.

An article in *Newsweek* magazine documents what many of us have always suspected: there are two major drawbacks to these devices.[\[6\]](#) The first is distraction overload. 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.

A second problem is what is called "continuous partial

attention.” People who use mobile devices (like a BlackBerry or an iPhone) 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 BlackBerry.

But another hidden drawback associated is less creativity. Turning on a mobile device or a cell phone 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 reduces daydreaming.

We also can see how new technology affects the way we process information and react to it emotionally. The headline of one article asked this question: Can Twitter make you amoral?[\[7\]](#) Research was done at the Brain and Creativity Institute of the University of Southern California to see the impact of social networks like Twitter.

What the researchers found was that human beings can sort information very quickly. And they can respond in fractions of seconds to signs of physical pain in others. But other emotions (like admiration and compassion) take much longer to register. In fact, they found that lasting compassion in a relationship to psychological suffering requires a level of persistent, emotional attention.

So how does that relate to a technology like Twitter? The researchers found that there was a significant emotional cost of heavy reliance on a rapid stream of news snippets obtained through television, online feeds, or social networks such as Twitter. One researcher put it this way: “If things are

happening too fast, you may not even fully experience emotions about other people's psychological states and that would have implications for your morality."

The point of these studies is that media does have an impact. A wise and discerning Christian will consider the impact and limit its negative effects.

Social Networks

Social networks such as Facebook and MySpace create an interconnected web of friends and family. People who study these networks are beginning to understand the impact they are having on us.

At a social networking site, you find someone and ask to be his or her friend. Once you are accepted, you become a member of their network, and they become a member of your network. This opens the door to finding and making additional friends. The ability to extend your circle of friends is one of the many benefits of social networking.

One concern about social networking is that it, like most of the new media, increases distraction and fragmentation of thought. The quotes, stories, jokes, and video clips come at an increased rate. A concentrated conversation with one person is difficult. Look over the shoulder of someone in a social networking site who has lots of friends. Content quickly scrolls downward, and it feels like you are at a party where lots of people are all talking at once.

Also these networks tend to shorten our time of concentration. Steven Kotler makes this case in his *Psychology Today* blog, "How Twitter Makes You Stupid."[\[8\]](#) 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 is reducing the time of concentration to a few dozen words. He thinks that constantly using Twitter will tune “the brain to reading and comprehending information 140 characters at a time.” He predicts “that if you take a Twitter-addicted teen and give them a reading comprehension test, their comprehension levels will plunge once they pass the 140 [character] mark.” I am sure someone is already testing that hypothesis. Soon we should know the results.

Social networks do help us keep track of people who do not live near us, and that’s a plus. But we are kidding ourselves if we believe that social networks are the same thing as true community. Shane Hipps, writing in *Flickering Pixels*, says this about virtual communities: “It’s virtual—but it ain’t community.”

Social networks also have a great deal of power to influence us. Sociologists Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler document this in their new book, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*. They believe that happiness is contagious and so is obesity and quitting smoking. We are not only influenced by our friends, but are even influenced by our friend’s friends. They say the world is governed by what they call “three degrees of separation.”

Addiction is another concern. Years ago, counselors discovered Internet addiction. Now they are starting to talk about Facebook addiction. Lots of youth and adults spend too much time in front of a computer. Social networks are wonderful tools, but wisdom and discernment are necessary in order to use them correctly.

Media Addiction

The Barna Group does lots of surveys, and that has led George Barna to conclude that “media exposure has become America’s most widespread and serious addiction.”[\[9\]](#) I have always been hesitant to label our high levels of media exposure an addiction. We seem to have an addiction label for every behavior. But George Barna makes a convincing case.

Addiction changes our brains by altering the chemical balance and flow within the brain and by even altering the structure of the brain. According to the American Psychiatry Association, we can legitimately call something an addiction when certain symptoms manifest themselves.

For example addictions change our brain structure, altering emotions, motivations, and memory capacity. Addictions cause withdrawal symptoms when exposure to the addictive item is eliminated. Addictions cause the people to abandon or reduce their involvement in normal and healthy activities.

Certainly media can be positive in terms of education and relaxation. But most media content, Barna argues, “winds up serving the lowest common denominator because that’s where the largest audience” is to be found.

There is a generational trend. The builder generation did not grow up with media and never became accustomed to it. The boomer generation embraced media, and the following generations expanded it use in ways unthinkable a few decades ago.

If we were truly serious about controlling the media input in our lives and our children’s lives, we would see examples of parents putting boundaries on media exposure. We see nothing of the sort. Expenditures on personal media, in-home media, and mobile media continue to increase.

It is not that parents don’t understand the dangers. Barna

reports that three-quarters of parents say that exposure of their children to inappropriate media content are one of their top concerns. But they continue to buy their kids the media tools and continue to allow them to be exposed to inappropriate content.

By the time a young person reaches age 21, he or she will have been exposed to more than 250,000 acts of violence through TV, movies, and video games. He or she will have listened to thousands of hours of music with questionable lyrical content. Most parents know that much of what their children see or hear isn't wholesome

This may be one of the biggest challenges for society in general and even the church in particular. Most parents recognize the danger of the media storm in which they and their children live. But that are unwilling to take the necessary steps to set boundaries or end their media addiction.

Some Concluding Biblical Principles

In a previous article on [Media and Discernment](#), I talked about the need for Christians to evaluate the impact of media in their lives. We need to develop discernment and pass those biblical principles to our children and grandchildren.

The new media represents an even greater threat and can easily conform us to the world (Rom. 12:2). Media is a powerful tool to conform us to a secular worldview and thus take us captive (Col. 2:8) to the false philosophies of the world.

Christians should strive to apply the following two passages to their lives as they seek discernment concerning the media. The first is Philippians 4:8. "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

The second is Colossians 3:2–5. “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”

Notes

1. Rachel Marsden, “Technology and the New Me Generation,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 December 2009.
2. Rebecca Hagelin, “Narcissism and Your Family,” 15 February 2010, www.townhall.com/hagelin.
3. Suzanne Fields, “Can the Internet Change How You Think?” 15 January 2010, www.townhall.com/fields.
4. Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” *Atlantic*, July/August 2008.
5. Ibid.
6. Sharon Begley, “Will the BlackBerry Sink the Presidency?” *Newsweek*, 16 February 2009.
7. “Can Twitter Make You Amoral? Rapid-fire Media May Confuse Your Moral Compass,” 14 April 2010, www.in.com.
8. Steven Kotler, “How Twitter Makes You Stupid,” *Psychology Today*, 15 May, 2009, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-playing-field/200905/how-twitter-makes-you-stupid.
9. George Barna, “Media Addiction,” 25 January 2010, www.barna.org.