The Social In Social Media
Long read assignment by 2timesDAN

Born in 1999, I feel I won the privilege to live in the same millennium with some of the greatest minds, influencers, and inventors ever to live. Also, I had the opportunity to grow up at a time when smartphones were yet to be invented and used in the manner they are being used today, and so I feel I got to enjoy the best (or the least) of both worlds, the world without smartphones and social media, and the world with them.

Social media have drastically changed the world. Social media has many positive effects, it builds connections between people and societies from all around the globe, it contributes to businesses, and gives people the stage to show their spirit and creativity among huge crowds. Social media gives people motivation and education in ways that were never exist before.

Despite all of the above, consider the next experiment everyone can do: Next time you're going out, whether to a park, to the mall, or just walking with your dog, observe the people in your surroundings, and try to estimate what percentage of them are currently dealing with their personal devices. Most chances are that the majority of the people who "participated" in our small experiment are using their smartphones. Some of the common scenarios are a father missing out on his child laughing and smiling on the swings, maybe a worker on a break, missing out on a beautiful sunset, or maybe a group of friends, sitting together, each playing a different game on a different electrical device.

I feel the biggest problem with smartphones and social media is it causes people to miss their own lives. I see children who grow up these days, and instead of playing catch, football, or any other physical activity, they are playing video games or spending their time watching other people posting about their adventures.
Except for the problem mentioned above, which might be more of a subjective problem, there are serious psychological and physical health issues that are being caused by smartphones such as depression and trait anxiety, vision problems, and more[1].

All of these problems are caused by our rising need to spend time on our smartphones, checking and scrolling through social media every few minutes. If you feel you are spending more time on your smartphone than before, this is not by chance. Social networks intentionally provide a dopamine-inducing social environment, social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram produce the same neural circuitry that is caused by gambling and recreational drugs to keep consumers using their products as much as possible[2].
Social media networks act like drugs, and they are made this way deliberately by the companies who gain from them.

The Social Dilemma[3] is a docudrama film from 2020. The film examines how social media's design nurture addiction to maximize profit.
The most notable quote I took from the movie is "*if you're not paying for the product, then you are the product*".
The primary way social media companies like Meta and Twitter make money is through selling advertising, therefore, their customers are actually advertisers. In 2020, Meta's average revenue per user was 32.03$, at that year Meta had 2.89 billion users so you can do the math here.
Point is that these companies gain more when the user is using more, and they will do everything to get you to do that.
There are countless books, movies, and articles about the various ways these companies make us use their product more and more and become proper addicts.

Addiction is a word that almost always has a negative meaning. When thinking about addiction we usually think of things like drug addiction, alcohol addiction, shopping addiction, and more. These addictions are usually led by companies who benefit from great income as these addictions are getting wider and stronger.
Social media companies today act as "drug dealers" in our society, however, they don't need to sell their "drugs" on a shady street corner downtown.
They can sell it in the middle of Times square.

So we have established that for major parts of society, social media and smartphones are acting as a lifeline. It is obvious that as the years go by more and more people will be addicted, less real human interactions will occur and civilization and society may never be the same again.

An important question to ask is who's responsible. This question can be divided into two parts, who is to blame for what has happened, and who is responsible for the future.

As the internet grew bigger and globalization took a huge boost, making connections got easier than ever. As of 2022, there are 17 social media platforms with at least 300 million active users[4].

It's hard to tell whether future implications were taken under consideration when the creation of companies like Facebook took place. Society got to a point where these companies dictate agendas. The network used to be "naive", people would upload pictures of their dogs and play Farmville together. As time passed more opportunities to make more money have arisen. Political parties have begun to understand the power of social media and the ability to influence and create more impact using social media advertisements instead of regular old road banners. Today politics are taking a big part in social media, extremists are much easier to find and tolerance is nowhere to be seen.

In no way can one determine unequivocally that social media companies have not tried to be more responsible and considered any future implications when developing and expanding their product. However, if taking Facebook as an example, past experience of scandals, such as the *Cambridge Analytica*[5] case and many more[6], we can infer that not the good of society is what drives decisions in Facebook.

One can claim that the responsibility to monitor social media and its use of them is of the government, however, even today, almost 40 years after the invention of the internet, there are still no clear rules about it, and a lack of control as governments can only try and regulate the internet in their own countries.

Social media companies probably haven't been created in order to increase suicide rates among teenagers and encourage depression, the meteoric growth of the internet, population, and technology contributed, but the lack of action to prevent and fix those problems is the responsibility of the companies.

Today, social media companies are aware of their power, strength, and their devastating impact on society, however, these companies are only trying to make things worse for us.

The movie "The Social Dilemma" features interviews with some senior positions who used to work for companies like Google, Youtube, and Facebook, and they describe how there are teams whose goal is to make the platform more addictive. It's hard to define good and bad as we all perceive these terms in different matter, but it's easy to notice the unethical ways these companies run their business.

So is there anything to do and who is to take responsibility now?

As seen, the social media companies themselves have not proven their "loyalty" to their users. These companies' net worth today is too big to regulate, despite continuous efforts by congress in the US and other countries.

The key to the problem lies in people's desires.

With the expansion of social media and smartphones, our wants and needs have changed drastically. For example, kids today are spending their free time totally different than older generations. According to one study[7], children spend an average of 18.6 hours of their free time playing on screens per week compared to 10.6 hours spend playing outside per week. Also, according to a BBC News article in 2015[8], kids consumed six and a half hours of screen time per day compared to kids in the mid-1990s who had an average of three hours. So due to the circumstances, kids' adolescence today is different, it's clear that this is not the "fault" of the kids as they are guided to this reality by the social media companies, however, the adults and parents have the ability to determine their child's present and guide their future. All parents should be more aware of the effects of the devices they allow their kids to have. Most parents probably want the best for their children, picking the easy route and filling a child-free time with smartphones can have consequences, and maybe adults should also turn off their smartphones once a while, and notice their child laughing and smiling on the swings.

It seems social media companies may present to the outside that they are moral and are making efforts to act according to ethical guidelines, but internally, they are investing in creating the platform more addictive

and their primary goal is to more users, get them to spend more time on the app and make the company bigger and bigger. Meta (Facebook) revenue in 2021 was 117 billion dollars. Israel's budget for the same year was 131 billion dollars.

It may be time for us to realize that not everyone has our best interest in mind, and we can change our life and daily routine by simply pressing "Delete".

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[2] Jones, A. (2019). *The neuroscience behind social media addiction*. Addiction Center. Retrieved from https://www.addictioncenter.com/drugs/social-media-addiction/

[3] Orlowski, J. (Director). (2020). *The Social Dilemma* [Film]. Netflix. https://thesocialdilemma.com/

[4] Global social media Statistics https://datareportal.com/social-media-users

[5] Confessore, N. (2018, April 4). *The Cambridge Analytica scandal and the fallout for Facebook*. The New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-scandal-fallout.html

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