

Here's how to make Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter fun again

Harry McCracken

14-18 minutes

Like a lot of people, I wrestle with the pros and cons of social media. The desire to reach out and feel connected is a fundamental aspect of our species. The human brain evolved to seek out human contact. It's no surprise, then, that the need to be tagged, tweeted, and liked stems on some level from this very primal feeling of wanting to be loved, valued, and seen. It's the two-year-old at the beach, waddling toward their parents, squealing, "Look at me!" That's basically what social media is.

The medium is new, but the desire is not. There is a term familiar to Leonard Cohen fans and readers of *Genesis*: "Hineni," which means "Here I am." It's a profound declaration of self. But the documentation of ourselves in front of every sunset, before eating a plate of caramelized brussels sprouts, every time we walk over the Brooklyn Bridge or go to a concert, is a shallow echo. *Here I am* becomes *Look at me* becomes *Like and subscribe*. There are now almost too many ways to feel connected, to be "seen," at the expense of just "being" with one another.

Humans are hardwired to be social creatures. But this ancient, innate impulse is now being translated through this new way of being social—through social media—which can warp things.

My mother, with her perspective as a psychologist, says, "Success distances you from people, and vulnerabilities bring you closer." Too many social media feeds seem to be attempts to show just the successes, not the vulnerabilities, only creating more distance. It seems to me that those people who only show a perfect version of their life are usually the ones trying to hide their vulnerabilities or pain the most.

Let's remember that the other meaning of "screen" is "filter." All the social media on our screens is filtered—sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. It's always, in some way, distorted, edited, reshaped.

All of which can result in misperceptions. We know that experience of getting an email or a text and taking offense, but then when we actually hear the words from the person, face-to-face, with body language and eye contact and all the other ways we communicate, we realize that we just interpreted them incorrectly. While emojis are an attempt to rectify this problem, not all people use them, and our infinitely subtle facial expressions really cannot be conveyed by a handful of cartoon faces. Then there's the other side: when people think that just because there's no face attached to their words, they can be more cruel. There are a lot of ugly examples; just see the comments section of almost any website. Forgetting they're interacting with a person, people sometimes act less than human.

Too fast for our own good

The speed of social media can also be a drawback. "Deepfake" videos—which are digitally altered to make something that never happened look very real—and violent user-

posted footage can race around the world and do real harm before they're taken down, if they're taken down at all. We also post before we truly have time to think. Others pile on before they have all the details or context. Which can result in the awful ritual of social media public shaming, sometimes deserved, sometimes not, in which someone's whole life can be ruined in a matter of hours. The nuance and understanding that time and distance provide are missing from social media entirely. There is no doubt that a lot of desire to check in on social media is to feel less alone, yet the ongoing paradox is that it can also make us feel left out and disconnected.

Sometimes, however, social media is a lifeline. Social media can help us feel less isolated, connecting us with people with similar interests, viewpoints, and identities. The internet has met this need in unprecedented ways, and it's been unbelievably helpful for a huge range of populations: people dealing with physical or mental health problems, LGBTQ people looking for community or resources, and people who gain strength and reassurance from other members of their groups. It helps people feel less lonely, especially important for elderly people who may have trouble getting out and around.

And although it's not face-to-face, social media is still social. It lets you stay in touch. You can see your friends' kids grow up, even when they live across the country or in a different part of the world. When something significant happens—an eclipse, or the death of someone loved and admired in society—everyone can use the same hashtag to unite a conversation around it. On your birthday, you can feel bursts of love in a multitude of ways online. There are moments when what someone shares is so beautiful, deep, or raw that it brings me to tears. Social media lets my film studio host global conversations on subjects like character or gender equality or healthy screen use. Groups around the globe host their own unique events that day, and we link them all together with a live stream and unified hashtags. On any given day, I can search a hashtag to see all the different perspectives on it unfiltered. These are times when social media shines.

That's also why I love Twitter. I follow a diverse group of people and enjoy bumping into different perspectives that take me to unusual places. I read, reshare links, watch, and retweet, resulting in a very exciting, fast combustion of ideas, which has even resulted in real-life friendships and collaborators.

Social media offers a way to share ideas in a broad, scalable manner. It can facilitate the mass political organizing that has resulted in real change all over the world. If you have a project (a fund-raising pledge, an issue you care about, a book, a film), it's a great way to reach a lot of people all at once. It's quite an exciting feeling to set a project into motion online. Social media also lets you do research and development in real time, trying out new ideas and seeing the response. All of which means, unless you have a research and development lab, a printing press, a TV network, and a radio station, you'll probably need it to launch a project.

And therein lies the rub. Social media can be very useful, but as media theorist and author of *Team Human* Douglas Rushkoff has argued, with good reason, it can also be antihuman, antisociety, and antisocial, driven by commercial agendas whose priorities don't align with our own. In 2017, Tristan Harris, a former Google employee who now heads up the Center for Humane Technology, gave a TED talk titled "[How a Handful of Tech Companies Control Billions of Minds Every Day](#)." With his insider knowledge, he shared how massive investment in studying the brain was then parlayed into monetizing time and attention through options like the "Snapstreak"—a feature on Snapchat that addicts teens into having to check in every twenty-four hours with someone, or else they'll lose the streak.

How a handful of tech companies control billions of mi...



In his book *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, [computer scientist and author Jaron Lanier](#) presents social media's many cons, including "Social media is undermining the truth," "Social media is destroying your capacity for empathy," "Social media is making you into an asshole," and "Social media hates your soul." His extreme take reveals truths we need to look at. Already, our data has been used to skew elections, spread false information, and radicalize the disaffected. It is hard for people to get their minds around the vast ramifications of this, but clearly, we need to.

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Because I'm not ready to give up social media entirely, my compromise is trying to be more intentional in how I use it. I agree with MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle when she says, "I'm not anti-technology, I'm pro-conversation." In her seminal book *Alone Together*, she describes the ways technology is changing and unsettling our relationships with friends and loved ones.

Like Turkle, Lanier, and Rushkoff, I'm unsettled by these changes too, and I appreciate their viewpoints, which focus on finding ways to make tech work for us rather than the other way around. Because even though I grapple regularly with all of these perspectives like an ever-turning Rubik's Cube, I do think social media can be beneficial. My "opticism" (what Ken and I call our viewpoint, as in optimism + skepticism) usually tries to land on how we can use these tools in a positive way.

Social media lets us interact with people we would never encounter otherwise. And as long as we haven't curated our feeds into echo chambers, this means being exposed to diverse perspectives, which is crucial to grow as individuals and as a society.

Ask yourself 'Why?'

I ultimately believe we can evolve when and how we are using these new forms of communication, continually asking ourselves questions around our use. For example, why are you using this particular social media channel? Is it for work? Is it to connect with family and friends? Is it wanting to present a version of your life to the world? Is it to experience other perspectives? Do you use all the social media channels for the same purpose? Do some serve certain purposes, while others don't?

Next: How often are you using them? If you're on the channels more than you'd like, well, there's a good place to start. Then, how quickly are you posting? Ask yourself questions before you post: How will people receive this information? What's the purpose of sharing

it? And is this information best communicated face-to-face with close friends and family, on a call, via email or text, or on social media?

In my daughter's fourth-grade class, there is a lot of talk about not discussing "fun playdates" with another person in front of someone else because it makes them feel bad and left out. When does it ever feel good to hear about a playdate or party that you weren't invited to or a fabulous vacation you didn't go on? That's a lot of what's on social media. Whether it's kids, teenagers, or adults, I don't think we ever age out of feeling left out.

We need to recalibrate as each new iteration of social media arrives, because each presents advantages and challenges, and tools we can't even imagine are still to come. I was going to attempt to unpack Snapchat—which younger users turn to more than texts or email—but Odessa warned, "Mom, don't write about something you don't understand." So I asked her to dissect it, along with giving strategies about using it so it doesn't use you. Here is what she said:

The appeal of Snapchat has moved beyond disappearing messages. Perhaps that's what drew people to it originally, but now Snapchat is like a common room. The majority of Snapchat is just communicating with friends, not publicizing yourself like on other platforms. Snapchat allows communication beyond the text; you can use your face to illustrate your point, or take quick videos to rant or explain. Snapchat is frequently disparaged because most adults don't understand its function, focusing instead on its secrecy, the vanity of its selfie-taking filters, and its infamous 'streaks.' But we just see it as the new way to communicate, like a telegram, phone call, or text.

Snapstreaks are designed to keep users online, and Odessa quickly figured out she needed parameters. She says: "I tend to go on Snapchat rather sporadically depending on my stress level and the length of my to-do list. For a while, I kept with it because I was afraid to lose connections with people. But these connections can be quite shallow, although you are communicating every day. You can have a streak with a person but not talk at all while at school. Once I let go of needing to keep up streaks, I focused on going onto Snapchat only when I wanted to, not for the sole purpose of keeping up a streak."

On social media, we're all plants, leaning toward the sunlight we can't get enough of.

It's helpful to have a social media strategy no matter what age you are. I've tried a lot of different strategies, and this is what works best for me: I highly curate who I follow on some channels, and open it up wide to a lot of different perspectives on others. On Instagram, I follow only very good friends who post rarely and people who make art or design. On Facebook, I follow only family and friends who live far away, and those who post things that truly make me think. On Twitter, I'm much more in my head and not my heart. I follow a wide range of people with many different views than mine—they get me out of my bubble. I also frequently go to a website called AllSides.com that shows the headlines from the left, center, and right on big news. I try to never look at social media before I go to sleep, because those people often show up in my dreams. Be careful who you let into your head.

I finally realized I needed to turn off all notifications on my phone except for calls or texts from key family and friends. Do you really need notifications to alert you to every piece of stressful news, every like or retweet? These kinds of alerts may make us feel important, involved, and valued, but it can be even more empowering to turn them all off and choose when you go in and check. Given that it takes twenty-three minutes to regain focus after you have been interrupted, how much time do you want to lose because of social media notifications? We all want to feel connected, but it's important to be sure that it's to something that feeds instead of drains you. Last, I try to take social media breaks. Taking

the occasional week off from Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook can be great for your schedule as well as your soul. This is what my weekly day off does as well. See how you feel.

On social media, we're all plants, leaning toward the sunlight we can't get enough of, seeking the warmth of likes, hearts, and retweets. But staying rooted and grounded is important. Being intentional about how you use social media and having your own strategy gives you time to process how it's affecting your life and find what you may want to change.

Honored by Newsweek as one of the "Women Shaping the 21st Century," Tiffany Shlain is an Emmy-nominated filmmaker and founder of the Webby Awards. Her films and work have received more than eighty awards and distinctions, including being selected for the Albert Einstein Foundation's Genius: 100 Visions of the Future. NPR names Shlain's UC Berkeley address on their list of best commencement speeches, and her films have premiered at top festivals, including Sundance. She lectures widely on the relationship between technology and humanity. Find out more on [TiffanyShlain.com](https://www.tiffanyshlain.com) and follow [@TiffanyShlain](https://twitter.com/TiffanyShlain).

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