

I wake up in the morning, not to the Passerine's sound so sweet, not even to the ewe's shrill and displeasing bleat, instead I wake up to a cacophony of messages and notifications, full to the brim with Anay's reels and Riya's tweet. In today's environment. With rapid digitalisation galore, the meaning of communication has transcended into a singular thing, social media. While on the one hand, it is easily cognisable how social media has made man evolve, with many considering it the zenith of the technological revolution, on the other hand, just like a pill taken to keep viruses at bay, it has a plethora of side effects which do not augur well for our race.

Prima facie, social media is a triumph unparalleled in both, its disruptive nature and its seemingly everlasting impact on us. Communication with far away friends and family is just a click away, as opposed to the previous inability to contact them. The cofounder of WhatsApp, Jan Koum, is quoted as having said, "Communication is the core of our society. It is what makes us human". According to Biomed Central, a London based organisation, social media has fuelled social connections, boosted peer support by finding others with common interests as oneself as well as increased exposure to differing perspectives and viewpoints, inevitably expanding one's worldview. Furthermore, there is an increased number of personalised safe spaces for individuals shy of saying something, and there is swifter transmission of information and updates out of every part of the world. Referred to as a "modern day, international town square" by Elon Musk, social media has certainly improved human interactions and expanded the social circles of many. For example, my octogenarian grandmother, devoted to piety and spirituality, found solace in friends she hadn't met in years and cousins she hadn't interfaced with since childhood on getting a phone and joining social media. At first oblivious to the array of resources and opportunities it provided, she quickly adapted herself, and is now the most active member of any group she is a part of on social media. Corporates have also received heavy dividends with the advent of the age of social media, with acceleration provided in the pace of brand awareness, and ease in consumer interaction. Irrespective of all this, social media has helped in forging and reuniting everlasting relationships. In 1986, a baby was found wrapped in a red sweater, left at a Burger King restroom. In 2019, the baby, by then a young mother, continued the quest to find her birth mother, one fulfilled by her post on Facebook. Nevertheless, famed Greek author and my guide since I was an infant, Aesop, said that every truth has two sides, and that it was well to look at both prior to committing and believing one or the other to be more relevant.

Let us start with the key argument in favour of social media, improved communication. It definitely makes us feel like someone miles away is in front of us, while subconsciously making someone in front of us is sitting miles away. It has been observed that social media has reduced the interpersonal communication in the offline environment, and it is noticed across all age groups, dealing a decisive blow to what the majority of paediatricians agree is the fundamental aspect of a childhood, connecting with our parents and family from a young age. The situation has crossed such an adverse juncture, such that over a decade ago, the University of Melbourne

acquainted the world with a term called ‘phubbing’, defined as the practice of ignoring one’s companions in order to pay attention to one’s phone or other mobile device. Furthermore, do you personally believe that a purely formal comment, sympathising with you, on your “Had a bad day” post is equivalent to a hug in the same situation?

Additionally, according to Pew Research, 64% of adults in the United States perceive social media to be more detrimental than it is beneficial, particularly due to the rise in spread of misinformation, harassment, censorship and constant surveillance tactics. The first amongst these reached a fever pitch in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, such that the Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, said that along with the global pandemic, we were simultaneously fighting a ‘misinfo-demic’, powered by a barrage of false statements paraded as facts and promoted by ‘credible’ sources. Talking about this, we are compelled to recollect the gruesome visuals of the 2021 Insurrection of the United States Capitol, in which Facebook groups, whose membership was fuelled by the algorithm, played an instrumental role. Subsequently, a whistleblower and former Product Manager at Facebook, Frances Haugen, informed the Securities and Exchanges Commission of the gross privacy violations the firm undertakes, claiming that “Facebook prioritises profits over privacy”. The important thing to remember through all of this is that Facebook is a giant, commanding over three billion Monthly Active Users as of July, 2023.

According to a study by the National Institute of Health, there is an evident decline in communication with one’s family and developing a more introverted nature, primarily observed in individuals in the formative tween and teenage years. It has also been seen to fuel abnormal cognitive psychopathological disorders in a concerning quantity of individuals. One of the sharpest criticisms of social media, particularly regarding the younger users, concerns body shaming, in some cases leading to Body Dysmorphic Disorder, which has been attributed to suicides across adolescents. Particular influencers, including Chris Bumstead and Kayla Itsines have been blamed for fuelling the aforementioned increase. Another study by Biomed Central linked adolescent suicides in Europe with social media, pertaining to a few common themes like addiction, triggers and imitation, as well as cybervictimisation and psychological entrapment. In fact, social media has also been blamed for increased exposure of minors to adult and graphic content, be it sexual or intensely violent.’

A 2022 article in India Today portrayed the tale of Christopher Dawley, a seventeen year old from Wisconsin, who committed suicide over problems caused by social media addiction, and how his parents were still attempting to pursue justice by holding social media giants accountable. A similar story was seen in London, where a fourteen year old girl, Molly Russell, committed suicide in 2017 over social media related issues, with a London court subsequently blaming the companies, referring to it as “social media’s big tobacco moment”. Furthermore, misinformation in times of

actual distress, such as the time of the 2010 earthquake which reduced Haiti to rubble, hamper aid by negatively affecting people's participation. A recent story by NewsLaundry showed the dirtiest facets of misinformation surrounding the ensuing Israeli Palestinian conflict, with the sharing of a graphic video depicting a man beheading a child going viral on X (formerly known as twitter), with inflammatory hashtags such as #IslamIsTheProblem.

Let us also ask ourselves how Instagram knows just what shirt I want to. Purchase or how they know I am going to Fiji next summer. They know it through exorbitant data monitoring and collection, as witnessed by the aforementioned whistleblower. They do it knowing well and good that virtually none of their users will read through and examine the totality of the carefully crafted legalese before clicking "I accept". Health issues relating to posture, vision, lack of exercise and unhealthy eating habits are also exacerbated by an algorithm designed to keep you hooked. So, where do we go from here? Well, Gloria Loring succinctly put it when she sang, "You take the good. You take the bad. You take them both and there you have, the facts of life,". It is just that in this context, it is a singular fact, the guiding principle behind mankind's successful three hundred thousand year long existence.

Moderation. A word so simple to say and yet nearly impossible to implement. Time and time again, we are told that anything in excess will be poisonous. While social media aids communication promotes awareness, as it did during the Manipur Conflict where the video depicting the horrendous violation of two women's dignity, and provides us with ease in virtually every aspect of our lives, we must be aware of the issues induced, not by the use, but by the misuse, abuse and overuse of social media's tested to by all the aforementioned data, statistics as well as those heart-wrenching occurrences. All of these just go on to show that there are two sides of any coin, and walking around both the advantages and disadvantages of social media in this constantly changing milieu, moving from one technological success to the other (Artificial Intelligence?). In conclusion, I wish to state that while social media plays a unique agathokakological role as humankind's greatest and worst enemy, simultaneously, we can work around the ill effects, work for the benefits and practice, moderation, displayed phenomenally by my grandmother, who will never miss her YouTube videos, while always being timely with her responsibilities with respect to prayer and the household. To end, I would like to quote a famous philosopher, having said, " Nothing is good or bad. Both of these are moulds inscribed upon it by our perception and usage of it". Our approach with social media should justifiably be the same.