

**Food For Thought Article: “How Antisocial is Social Media?”**

Excuse the language, but written on the van of the media company who provide my internet connection is this advertising tagline offering customers:

‘Broadband which blows the bloody doors off.’

It certainly has! Since the rapid spread of high-speed broadband in the 2000’s, the arrival of the iPhone, social media going viral in 2007, the introduction of ‘like’ and ‘retweet’ buttons in 2009, smartphones with front-facing cameras in 2010, the arrival of Facebook which acquired Instagram in 2012 (now both owned by Meta), all of us, and especially our youngsters, have felt the full force of ‘the doors being blown off’!

But could it be that today’s ‘connective technology’ is, paradoxically, leaving people, especially our young people, less connected and more isolated? Are smartphone-based relationships even causing anxiety and depression? Latest research figures tend to show that this is the case.

Of course, the use of Smartphones is not the **only** cause of increased mental ill-health, but it does seem to be one of the contributory causes. [See: Haidt J. (2024) *The Anxious Generation – How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Allen Lane]

No one can deny that there are positive benefits in using the internet and social media apps in that they can provide a positive community with others who share identities, abilities, and interests. Some young people report that their phones help them to relax and help them get in touch with their friends when they are worried or lonely.

Access to the internet can also create space for self-expression, provide access to important information, and offer fun and entertainment. And God is obviously using the internet to spread the gospel worldwide. All of this is positive ~ I wouldn’t want to be regarded as a Luddite!

However, it seems to me that there are considerable downsides to this technology which I don’t believe we are giving sufficient attention to. When children and adolescents in particular start spending most of their waking hours on their phones and other screens, sitting alone watching videos, playing games, scrolling through never ending feeds on Facebook, X, Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat etc., it can have a devastating effect on their development.

When children and young people first started getting smartphones, there was no research about their impact. Now there is, and it has become clear that exposing youngsters to things their brains aren't yet developed enough to deal with, can cause a whole host of problems including anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, eating disorders, as well as opening the door to cyberbullying or sexual predators. As someone has said: 'When we give our children access to the whole world in their pocket, we give the whole world access to our children.'

### **What are the Problems?**

#### ***Invasion of Privacy***

In these strange times in which we live, something has happened to the idea of privacy. Once a valued quality, it is now regarded, especially by young people, as being valueless. Everything must be shared otherwise it doesn't really exist! Your dog, the beach you are on, your baby, what you had for dinner, the film you watched last night ~ everything must be shared! Even nude pictures of themselves are being shared by some young people.

Smartphones are forever pinging and interrupting so that we are always 'somewhere else' and find it difficult to give focused attention to those around us and to what's happening in the real world. This is called 'Attention fragmentation' ~ it becomes difficult not to be distracted.

One advert I saw recently shows someone relaxing on holiday abroad when their smartphone pings to let them know, and see, footage of a delivery man leaving a parcel for them back home! The jingle that goes with this advert promises:

"Inner Peace – Brought to you by Ring."      (Security cameras)

Contrast this promise of peace with the biblical assurance that through prayer and petition with thanksgiving we will know 'the peace of God which transcends all understanding.' (Philippians 4:6&7)

Smartphones, then, have the power to distract us from being fully present in the 'now' and, when they are switched on, they can gatecrash privacy.

#### ***The Creation of Distorted Social-Validation Feedback Loops***

On some social media platforms users post content about themselves and then wait for judgements and comments from others. Any post that a user displays can be assessed in terms of likes, dislikes, shares, retweets, comments etc.

As we all know, adolescence can be a time of insecurity, introspection, self-absorption, and high subjectivity as we formulate exactly who we are and how we fit into the world. Positive feedback from others is an important part of the way we establish our identity and receive social validation.

But online, this process is open to abuse which is devastating for some of our young people. So-called 'cyberbullying' has increased and is more difficult to escape from because of our 'always on' technology.

Thinking, for a moment, about the needs adolescents have, psychologists have identified two powerful 'givens' which are particularly strong for them. Firstly, they have a bias/tendency to conform i.e. 'to do what most people are doing.' Secondly, they have an attraction to prestigious people, people of influence and excellence, which then raises the individual's own sense of prestige by association.

Of course, there are many gifted performers in the world of sport and entertainment, for example, and there are now also many examples of people who are regarded as prestigious but who have questionable claims to excellence.

Indeed, excellence and prestige have now, in many cases, been decoupled so nowadays you can be famous for not having done anything important but simply for being famous and having lots of online followers! You can be famous purely for being famous!

In 2023, Kim Kardashian had 364 million followers on Instagram. She became famous in 2007 for selling a pornographic film featuring her and an ex-boyfriend Ray J. Then with her sister, Kylie, (who in 2023 had 400 million followers on Instagram) and other family members, they set up a reality show called "Keeping Up with The Kardashians". This ran for 14 years from 2007-2021.

Thus, the social media platform designers invite us to become followers of their prestigious celebrities.

But Jesus said, "Follow me and I will make you ....."

The choice is ours.

Some popular online male influencers offer boys visions of masculinity that are extreme, whilst female influencers offer girls visions of femininity that are unrealistic. And the ways online influencers talk and behave in their virtual world is never going to work when our youngsters copy them in the real world setting of their own families, schools and colleges, workplaces, and communities.

Although some of the core developmental needs of boys and girls are the same, others are different. For example, girls' needs are oriented towards community, benevolence, co-operation, caring and empathy. Boys strive to individuate, expand the self, and place greater emphasis on efficiency, competence, and assertiveness.

Maybe you don't agree with these basic differences between boys' and girls' developmental needs, but I can promise you this... the social media Tech companies believe in them and they use them to hook their core audience!

Girls are more affected by visual social comparison and perfectionism.

In 2021 Olivia Rodrigo recorded a song she wrote called 'Jealousy, jealousy'. It begins with these words, "I kinda wanna throw my phone across the room ...cause all I see are girls too good to be true.... with paper white teeth and perfect bodies .... wish I didn't care.... co-comparison is killing me slowly."

Also, girls' aggression is more relational, so if you really want to hurt her the best way is to attack her relationships, turn her friends against her, spread gossip. Social media is fertile ground for causing this kind of harm.

For boys, self-identity is being distorted and the way they relate to girls and women in terms of intimacy is being influenced by pornography with its emphasis on domination, control, and even violence. I read a quote recently where a young man said: 'Violence is my love language.' In this artificial world there is no opportunity for boys to develop sensitivity and emotional literacy.

### ***Social Media Use Can Become an Addiction***

Anna Lembke, an American Psychiatrist, writes this, 'The Smartphone is the modern-day hypodermic needle, delivering digital dopamine 24/7 for a wired generation.' [Lembke A. (2021, P.1) *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*. Dutton.]

She identifies the universal symptoms for withdrawal from any addictive substance as being anxiety, irritability, insomnia, and dysphoria (the opposite of euphoria) [Lembke, 2021, P. 57]. These symptoms can be seen when a heavy user of social media has their smartphone taken away.

We must be aware, therefore, of how the social media Tech companies operate to attract, and keep, our young people 'hooked.' In a word they use 'Algorithms.' Algorithms are computerised systems which social media companies use to prioritise the content that is fed to the user.

They are a way of personalising and suggesting what the user may want to see. This is based on what they have viewed in the past, what may be most relevant to them, and what other people like them are watching.

Again, boys and girls are targeted differently. Girls may be fed stuff about the latest pop songs and make-up, whilst boys may be fed content which is sexual, violent, and misogynistic.

Once these algorithms get a hold of you, the content they feed you is very difficult to shake off ~ rather like the viper which fastened itself on Paul's hand when he was on the island of Malta.

We may ask, 'Why do these Tech companies go to such lengths?' Well, the answer is very simple: the more people they can get to use their platforms and the longer they can keep them there, the more money the Tech companies make through advertising. As usual, 'the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil' (1 Timothy 6:10).

**So, what can be done to make a difference to the way our young people are being adversely affected by social media?**

### ***The Importance of Freeplay.***

Surprisingly maybe, the first thing is to ensure that our children, teenagers, and young people have enough time for, and are encouraged to participate in, Freeplay. This is activity that is freely chosen and directed by the participants and teaches them how to take care of themselves, tolerate bruises, handle their emotions, read other children's emotions, take turns, resolve conflicts, learn to lose as well as to win, and how to play fair.

We are now entering the world of reality rather than virtual fantasy!

One of the problems, which has now been identified, certainly in Western nations, is that in the last 20 or 30 years we have ***underprotected our young people online and overprotected them in real life.***

All children and young people have the need to take risks, and participating in Freeplay is one way of doing this. There are 6 risks that children and young people seek out when adults give them some freedom, albeit with adequate supervision:

1. Heights (climbing trees, playground structures, sky ropes etc.
2. Speed (going down fast slides, driving a motorbike or car)

3. Experimenting with dangerous elements (water: white-water rafting, surfing) (fire: building campfires and bonfires, using the bar-b-q) (chemicals: I got my first chemistry set when I was 11 and later worked with very dangerous chemicals in industry!)
4. Rough physical play (wrestling, rugby, boxing)
5. Disappearing (hide and seek, wandering off, getting lost or separated)
6. Using dangerous tools (hammers, drills, saws etc.)

Has it ever struck you how important it was for Joseph, who was a carpenter, to teach his eldest son, Jesus, to carry on the family business? I wonder how many times Jesus hit his thumb with a hammer? Cut himself with a chisel? Got splinters of wood in his hands?

Being a carpenter is a risky business! However, this was good preparation for when Jesus was later to be about the much riskier business of doing the will of his heavenly Father.

Recently I was in the local park with 3 of our grandsons. There is a small stream which runs through the park and there were the 3–5-year-olds with their little fishing nets busy catching ‘fish’; others were playing ‘pooh sticks’ where you throw twigs into the stream and wait for them to emerge downstream from under the bridge! First one through is the winner!

Our grandsons used to enjoy those activities but no longer! Not appropriate now for their age. Instead, they decided to attempt standing jumps **across** the stream!

And we also took our other two grandchildren to ‘Vertigo’ ~ a variety of climbing walls about 30 feet high. Safe, but challenging! One of the notices said, ‘Vertigo participants may sustain bumps and bruises in using this equipment.’ Good stuff!

Freeplay involves safe, but stretching, activities which are age appropriate and include risk taking. Playing video games online offers none of these risks whatsoever. Compared with the real thing, they cannot possibly compete with the thrills, spills, and challenges of free play. To grow and mature into healthy adults, our children and young people need to be exposed to difficulties, disappointments, failures, and frustrations in the real world, as well as enjoying successes and achievements.

In the late 1980’s a grand experiment was carried out in the Arizonian desert. They built a huge, closed, artificial ecosystem – Biosphere 2 – which would

support 8 people for several years and would provide everything they needed: oxygen, water, food etc.

But there were problems from the word go. The oxygen levels were too low, the CO2 levels were too high, they couldn't grow enough food and the occupants were constantly hungry.

It was a complete failure. In the end, the two management groups in charge of the project fell out with one another and eventually two of the original occupants of the biosphere vandalised the whole project!

However, one important lesson they did learn was this. The trees they planted in the biosphere grew well to begin with but all of them, before they reached maturity, fell over! They discovered that one thing trees need to strengthen them is a strong prevailing wind which blows on them.

When trees are exposed to strong prevailing winds, the roots on the windward side go deeper to act as an anchor whilst the wood on the leeward side becomes thicker and stronger as the cells are compressed. Without exposure to strong winds, trees fall over and die.

And this is why God says to us: 'When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realise that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance.' (James 1:2&3, The New Testament in Modern English, JB Phillips).

Faith, like those trees, needs to be tested to become strong. As Christians, we need to be anti-fragile! Being shut away on our smart phones is not going to prepare us for life in the real world. Smartphones are experience blockers.

### ***The Importance of Parent and Teacher Control***

If we are waiting for others to take responsibility for our children's smartphone use and what they are exposed to, we will probably wait in vain. Like-minded parents and teachers must act.

Certainly, the social media companies themselves have done very little, if anything, to stem the flow of inappropriate content on their platforms. In theory, children must be 13 years old to get on most social media apps, but in practice children of any age can join simply by clicking on a box to say they are 13.

Similarly, pornographic content can be accessed by youngsters of any age if they click on a box to say they are 18 years old. There is no realistic attempt to age verify.

In the real world, it matters how old you are before you can do certain things e.g. buy tobacco, buy alcohol, drive a car, get married etc. But in the virtual online world, how old you are doesn't matter at all.

I heard someone say recently that to expect private social media companies to monitor and police themselves, when they are there primarily to promote their products and make as much money as possible, is like asking a tiger not to eat you! It just isn't going to happen.

Schools have also become aware of the smartphone issue. As one example of what seems to me to be good practice, see what is being done at the Q3 Academy at Langley, near Birmingham (<https://www.q3langley.org.uk/Parents/E-Safety-for-Parents>). There, smartphones are banned for the duration of the school day. I heard their Headteacher say recently that the pupils are now benefitting from more 'free learning' and 'better focus.' He also believes that in the future we will come to regard the dangers of social media as we now regard the dangers of smoking.

Here in the U.K. there is an organisation called 'Smartphone Free Childhood' (<https://smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk>) which is connecting parents and teachers in their local communities so they can make a pact not to give their children smartphones until they are at least 14 yrs old or social media before the age of 16.

Governments are also waking up to the problem. Here in the U.K., Ofcom (Office of Communications), the regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries, is working towards introducing a new law which will force social media firms to verify children's ages and prevent them from recommending unhelpful content. This will necessitate dealing with the algorithm problem, amongst other things.

However, this legislation will not come into force until 2025 and whether it will make any difference, we will have to wait and see. In theory, Ofcom will be able to fine social media companies and bring criminal prosecutions against them.

So, what can parents and teachers do? Without being too prescriptive, here are some guidelines: -



- Maximise time spent in real interpersonal relationships and activities.
- Encourage children to go on bigger, longer, age-appropriate adventures with their friends or a group.
- Delay the opening of social media accounts until 16. I realise this is a difficult one (because of peer pressure, possible social isolation and the ‘fear of missing out’), but 13 is too young.
- Limit activities that include screens (except for homework!).
- Turn screens off during mealtimes and family outings.
- Turn screens off and remove devices from bedrooms 45 minutes before bedtime (sleep deprivation is another drawback of smartphone use).
- Keep the channels of communication open with your children so you can talk about these things openly.

### **How Can the Bible Speak into These Issues?**

Finally, I would like to offer some relevant Bible verses for us all to personalise, meditate on, and apply in the context of what we have been considering: -

‘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.’ (Philippians 4:8)

‘It is dangerous to be concerned with what others think of you, but if you trust the Lord, you are safe.’ (Proverbs 29:25 – GNB)

‘The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’ (1 Samuel 16:7)

‘Don’t cherish exaggerated ideas of yourself or your importance, but try to have a sane estimate of your capabilities by the light of faith that God has given to you all.’ (Romans 12:3 – The New Testament in Modern English, JB Phillips)

‘We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.’ (2 Corinthians 10:12)

‘Your beauty should not be dependent on an elaborate coiffure, or on wearing jewellery or fine clothes, but on the inner personality – the unfading loveliness of a calm and gentle spirit, a thing very precious in the eyes of God.’ (1 Peter 3:3&4 – The New Testament in Modern English, JB Phillips)

‘And now a word to you parents. Don’t keep on scolding and nagging your children, making them angry and resentful. Rather, bring them up with the loving discipline the Lord himself approves, with suggestions and Godly advice.’ (Ephesians 6:4 – Living Bible)

‘Children, obey your parents; this is the right thing to do because God has placed them in authority over you.’ (Ephesians 6:1 – Living Bible)

And to conclude. Rather than allowing Tech companies to ‘blow the bloody doors off’ and provide a free-for-all, these biblical verses seem to me to offer secure boundaries and a framework within which God wants us all to operate for our own safety, security, freedom, and wellbeing.

We therefore need to control the access our children and young people have to which products, at which ages, and on which devices. Unfettered access to everything, everywhere, at any age, is proving to be disastrous.

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George Irving – November 2024

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