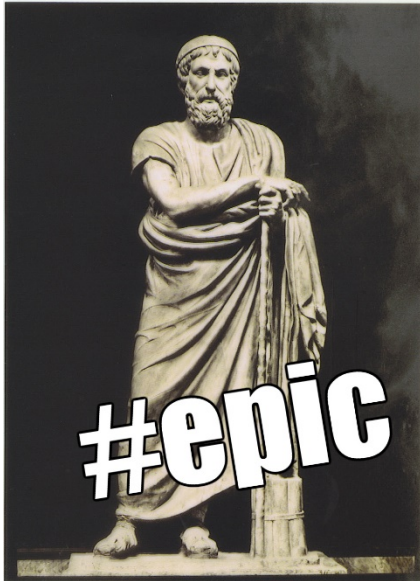




SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS DISCONTENTS

AUGUST 23, 2019

WHAT'S "SOCIAL MEDIA?"



What an age we live in! To communicate with others in the Old Days, one was forced to compose epic poetry and travel the lands reciting it. It was a rough life; influencers like Homer accumulated hundreds of likes and retweets, but the average bard sank into obscurity, chewed up by the pressure of content production.

Fortunately, today we have many fabulous and exciting social media platforms on which to share cat videos, berate people you've never met over intractable political issues, and provide soulless corporations fixated only on profit and networks of sleazy advertisers the deepest and most intimate knowledge of your thoughts, feelings, and relationships. It's ... great. Right?

Here's a rough definition of social media that I shamelessly

stole from Lifewire:

Social media are web-based communication tools that enable people to interact with each other by both sharing and consuming information.

Pretty broad, right? But social media take a lot of forms these days. We can expect a few identifying characteristics, though:

SINE QUA NON

- A **user account** - so that you, the user of the service, have your own personalized experience
- A **profile** - so that others can see all the clever answers you give to “Where do you live?” and “What do you like to do?”
- A **feed** - designed to keep you hooked, the familiar, endlessly scrolling series of updates and ads and friends’ thoughts and ads and sponsored content and ads ...
- **Liking/commenting** - *everyone* must know and acknowledge your pithy thoughts!

You’re convinced! You want in on the action. Okay, if you insist. Let’s look at the leading platforms on which you might make yourself known.

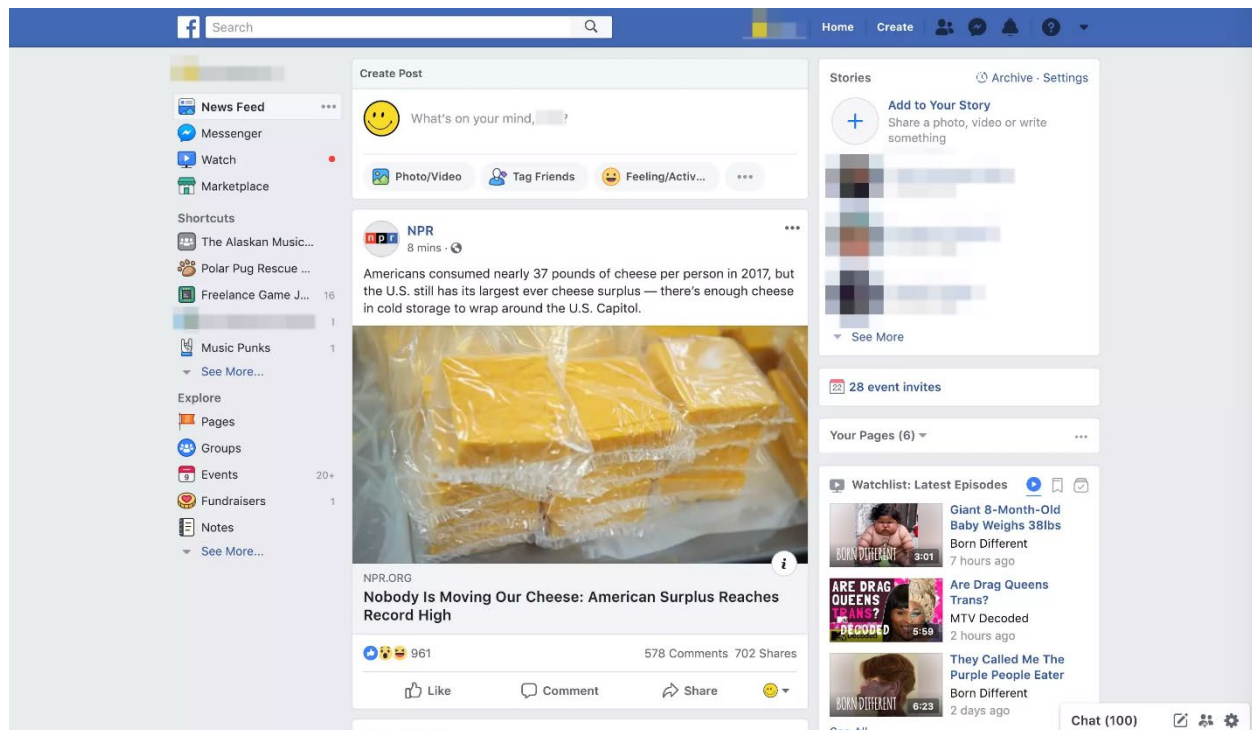
PLATFORMS (NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH PLATYPUSES)

FACEBOOK

The 450-pound silverback gorilla of social media, with over two billion monthly users. Unavoidable, ubiquitous, blue.

WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

Connecting with long-lost friends, sharing interesting sites or news stories (and adding your own commentary), messaging, keeping track of events you might want to attend, even buying stuff. Your home page will look like this:



INSTAGRAM

Photo-centric, Instagram is a stripped-down version of Facebook. It grew very successful – so Facebook bought it.

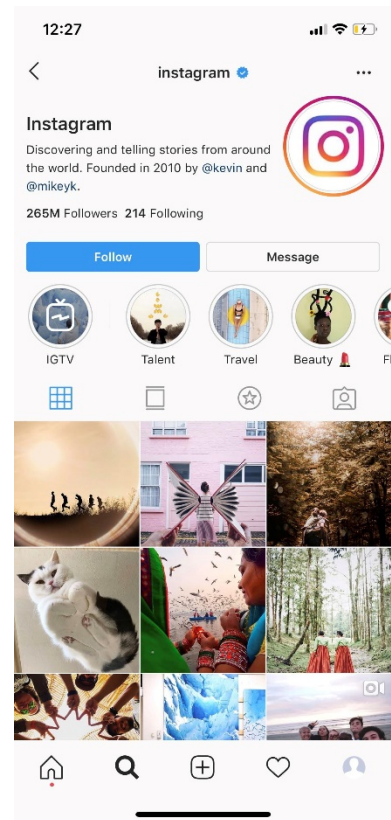
WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

Glamour shots of restaurant food, visual records of your travels, hobbies, creations, and presenting a filtered, hazy, staged version of your perfect life to make your followers feel inadequate and secure lucrative sponsorship deals. Instagram looks like this (on the right).

You'll notice it's vertical – Instagram is native to mobile devices. You can scroll through your feed on a computer, yes, but it takes sneaky wizardry to actually upload anything that way.

In Instagram, you can like photos, make comments, and send messages directly to the poster.

Instagram also supports mini-videos called stories (Facebook has adopted these too) and even has live-streaming called IGTV.



TWITTER

Where Instagram is photo-focused and Facebook is a massive tangled pile of All the Things, Twitter is tuned for short, snappy text (supported by images and video). Previously, Twitter posts had to fit into 140 characters, but in an upheaval whose controversy rivaled the French Revolution, this was recently doubled to 280. Still, people break

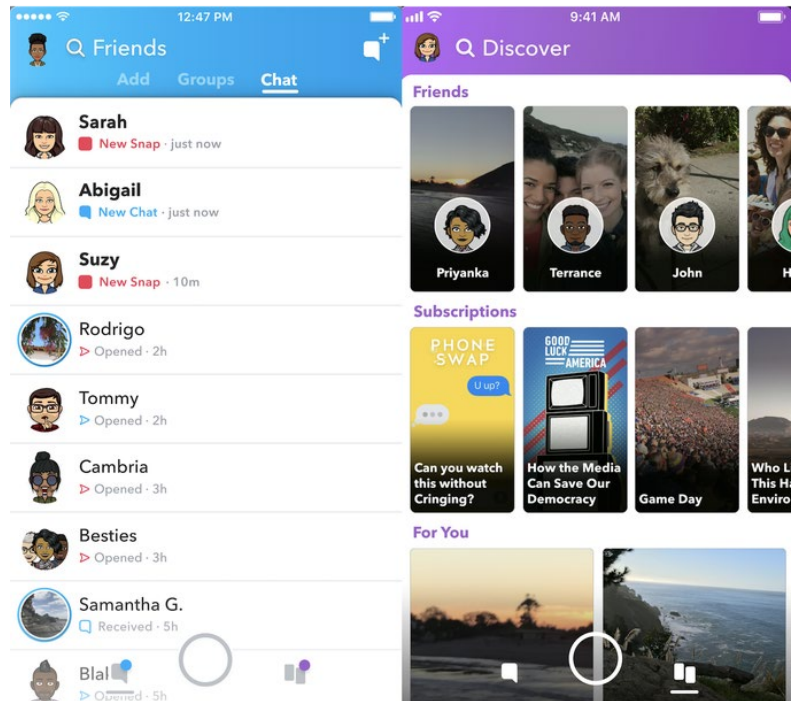
long messages (or rants) into multiple Tweets, which is ... inelegant. Twitter is chock full of journalists, activists, mavens, and trolls (they're all full of trolls).



Twitter looks like this here picture right here.

SNAPCHAT

Snapchat's whole deal is sending brief messages that are deleted after they're viewed (except there are apparently many ways to circumvent the disappearing, much to the dismay of people who sent "sensitive" images and videos to ultimately untrustworthy people, if you get my meaning). Snapchat is notable for the high quality of its filters – artificially intelligent overlays that can make you look as though you have puppy ears and a dog nose which stick to your face even as you move. This is apparently a proper use of programmers' time and our modern massive computing power. I guess.



I think young people use it. I am too old to “get” it, so I’m afraid I have little more to tell you. Uh, here’s a picture of it. There’s recently been a major redesign of the interface and apparently everyone hates it.

LINGO

To sound cool and converse with Gen-Z and even younger tadpoles apparently christened “Generation Alpha” by a cabal of marketers, know some social media jargon that has spread across most or all of the platforms and is in general use:

Go Viral – the goal for every social media user: post something that becomes wildly popular and, on monetized platforms, gets you rich. It spreads, you see, like a virus.

Memes – a meme is an idea thought of like an organism, in that it has a life of its own— reproduces, spreads, thrives, fades. In Internet jargon, it typically means pictures with overlaid text that communicate a feeling, or share an idea.

Likes – tap a little approving thumb or heart to show your appreciation of a post and help it go viral, or just to make the poster feel appreciated.

Stories – little videos or images strung together, perhaps with added captions.

Reposts (or retweets) – your way to repeat someone’s cool post on your own feed, so that your friends can see how much you like that one Twitter user’s great joke, or share information you feel is important.

@ - append an @ to the beginning of a user's online name or "handle" to ensure that your post containing the @ shows up in your target's feed. For example, you might tweet

@oscarmayer why don't hot dog packages have the same number of hot dogs as bun packages have buns?

You can also say, "At me," or "@ me," I suppose, to encourage people to post and tag you directly. Say this to a young person to earn "cred."

Hashtag – the # symbol. This too can be appended to the beginning of a word or phrase to tie it to others' posts on the same topic. Fascinated by lettuce? Obviously; we all are. Search for #lettuce in Twitter or Facebook to see the world's conversation about lettuce and lettuce-related material all in one place.

THE GOOD

Social media can connect us, re-connect us, provide a forum for conversation, and bring our attention to new and important or interesting things. It can entertain and it can inform. I did want to make sure I mentioned the good. So I have.

THE BAD AND THE (VERY, VERY) UGLY



Photo enhanced by me.

... From my tone, you know what's coming. The big **but**. Perhaps the deal of social media seems too good to be true. All this functionality for no money? How do they support themselves?

THE ADVERTISING-SURVEILLANCE COMPLEX

They support themselves by packaging you and selling you like a product. Ensorcelled by the ability to pontificate on your favorite brand of cat food or keep in touch with your far-flung kin in Appalachia, you enthusiastically over-share, disgorging details of your private life, age, precise location, interests, political views, sexual orientation, gender identity, group

membership, hobbies, possessions, and habits. These profiles of you are like delicious nectar to the hulking, bristled botflies that are advertising data brokers, crowding around you, slaver oozing from their probing mouthparts.¹

¹ In case it's unclear, I don't like this.

Unfortunately, invasive tracking doesn't end at the borders of your social media app. Facebook and Twitter operate advertising networks spread across the Internet and embedded in web pages all over the world. These place cookies on your device that can report to headquarters your browsing history. They know what you're looking at *right now*.

THE FAKEST OF FAKE NEWS

Humans are often clever creatures, but we suffer terribly from confirmation bias. We like to consume news, opinions, and rumors that align with our pre-existing feelings, and discard the rest. We like to imagine that we have secret knowledge of the real truth, so when it's revealed by QAnon that there's a vast operation of liberal elites sexually trafficking children, we believe it. *We know* it.

Think disinformation isn't that effective? Ask Vladimir Putin.

DECIDEDLY NOT THE BETTER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE

Philosophy has long debated whether human nature is good or evil. Like most binaries, it's false. It's both. We are the selfsame species that raises millions of dollars to support people in crisis whose stories go viral and that also foments partisanship, tribalism, and open hatred, linking distributed networks of nascent monsters who encourage one another and exacerbate the acidulated divisions undermining civilization.

Political tribes ossify, entrench, and fight bitterly. Bullies pile on, mocking targets who feel unable to escape, "doxing" enemies (discovering and revealing addresses and personal information). Marginalized people and those who upset the shadowy hordes of angry young men who are Extremely Online are intimidated, shouted down, threatened, and in some cases driven to suicide.

How bad can it get?

On March 15th of 2019, Brenton Tarrant arrived at the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, and began shooting worshippers inside the building before moving on to another. In two attacks he killed 51 people and injured another 49.

He live-streamed a video of himself doing so on Facebook.

Millions watched.

Despite the platforms' efforts to remove the video, it was re-uploaded and circulated again and again and again. A reminder: we are the same species that built the Parthenon and bound millions in slavery. That cuddles our puppies and that operated Nazi death camps.

Does social media, on balance, empower more greatly the light? Or the dark? I'll leave you to answer the question for yourself, as you must, and act accordingly.

HELL IS (MODERATING) OTHER PEOPLE

Don't worry; social media platforms have a plan for dealing with the pornography, vitriol, bile, violence, and filth uploaded by the virtual ton every second of every day: force underpaid contract workers in miserable conditions to watch it all and determine whether it should be removed.



Problem solved, right? The Verge recently published major stories about the lives of these workers, and to make a long story short, they're not pleasant. Post-traumatic stress, abusive supervisors, hostile work environments, a lack of protection, a lack of dignity. But they're contractors, so the platforms allow the misery to continue unless they're caught, in which case they hastily lift a corner of a rug and sweep the unpleasantness under it. Random contractors are also the people listening to your smart speaker recordings of you having inane conversations, going to the bathroom, or having sexual relations. Silicon Valley swims in venture capital and accolades for pushing forward the future. The code and the algorithm get the glory. Unhappy humans bear the burden.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

CHECK YOUR FACTS BEFORE YOU WRECK YOUR FACTS

It's a losing battle in the Age of Memes, but some organizations do their best to counteract the mis- and disinformation saturating social media. I strongly recommend checking them before you run with something that feels truthy.

A couple of these:

- Snopes.com
- Factcheck.org

OPT OUT

Browser extensions exist that can isolate Facebook from your other browsing or block social media cookies and buttons entirely, but they can't stop your installed apps from doing whatever they want. I encourage you to use them. But the best thing we can do? Delete our accounts. Be social in the real world.

Contact me at fwalther@millvalleylibrary.org with suggestions, feedback, and clarifying questions, and thank you. I'm sorry things got so dark, but ... well, social media is bad. Something moving too fast for us to understand and address. A rough beast slouching its way toward Bethlehem to be born. There's your takeaway.