

An Educator's 10 Concerns About Social Media

Robert S. Griffin

www.robertsgriffin.com

It's 4:00 on a Wednesday afternoon in April of 2013 and the class I teach at the university is scheduled to start in five minutes. As I enter the classroom door, I'm pleased to see that just about all the students are already there and seated. A few of them are chatting with one another, but most of them are curled over their handheld cell phones running their fingers across the screens checking for messages I presume, reading something, a message or perhaps a Facebook page, theirs or somebody else's, or rapidly thumbing something, a text message or tweet I suppose.

I'm struck by the image of all the eager-beaver cell phone activity I come upon and think to myself, this sure is different from what it was just a few years ago—ten years? five? I'm not sure, but anyway the contrast between the picture I'm taking in and the memory of not so long ago jumps out. On the way to class, I had walked among students, both going my way and coming toward me, with their cell phones to their ears talking away or, neck-bent, scrutinizing them and finger rubbing and poking. Between my office and the classroom, there's a street with a stop-and-go light, and I had to wait for a red light clustered among students, and that forced immobility appeared to occasion even more heightened engagement with the ubiquitous little tablets. Between the walk over and the classroom scene I felt like I was in cell phone city.

Back to the class, I take my seat in the front of the room—I have a bad back and have to teach sitting down (don't get old). I say something to the effect, "I appreciate everybody being on time like this. Let's get started."

Immediately, the cell phones get closed and put away. Most get put in a pocket or backpack. Some sit, invitingly I would suppose, on the smallish wood writing area that extends from one of the arm rests on the students' seats.

The class goes to 6:45 and I take a ten minute break somewhere around 5:15. Around that time, when it seems like a good place to stop, I say, "OK, let's take a break and get back together in ten minutes."

I do that and boom!--out come the cell phones and the eager-beaver starts right in; no transition, no segue into it, right to it.

Some sit at their seats the whole break and others rub and read and tap while walking out of the room, I suppose to go to a rest room. Some work their phones standing up against a wall in the hallway. Few say anything to anyone. I go to the restroom and wash and dry my hands next to a student standing by the sinks, yes, working his cell phone.

The break over, the cell phones dutifully stashed away or set in place for furtive glances and sly maneuverings, and the class starts up again. It gets to be 6:45 and I say, "See you next week" and you guessed it. Immediately out come the cell phones, a brief perusal while seated and then cell phone-and-me out the door.

My students couldn't be nicer, but I have picked up that all through the classes they are itchy to check their cell phones, and that seems to be an accurate perception. I've asked students how long can they go without checking their phones without feeling the urge. They tell me it's about five minutes tops before they start to get edgy. I don't have hard numbers, but I'm guessing this persistent cell phone check itch applies to most if not the preponderance of students I work with. More than a few of them have told me that from the time they get up in the morning until the time they go to bed at night, unless something, like my class, gets in the way and prevents it, they check their cell phone at least every five minutes. That's during meals, while studying, while talking to a friend, waiting for a movie to start, and I have a hunch they take to the bathroom with them--every five minutes, at least.

To put this into perspective, let's do a thought experiment. Imagine that cell phones do everything they do now, but that they were never miniaturized; they never got small as they are. Let's say they look exactly like a regular desk phone, big and heavy like that, with a rotary dial or touchtone, and with a receiver attached to the base by a couple of feet of cord. Back in the old days, which actually lasted until not so long ago, phones like this sat on a dining room table, let's say. People would get a phone call or two or three in a day, and make a phone call or two or three. In recent times, there'd be an answering machine and that got checked a time or two a day, after you got home from work or school and when you got back from the movies, and that would be about it. A phone was a convenience to be sure, but it was a phone, no big deal, not a central aspect of anybody's life, not a constant companion. It was just a phone, you call your sister after church on Sunday, you know?

Imagine if back then people had lugged that big heavy phone around with them all day, every day--to the mall, to the ballgame, to the restaurant, to the beach, to the workplace, to school, everywhere, no exceptions, all day. What if they stood on the street talking on it while waiting for the traffic light to change? That big phone, with the cord and the receiver. What if every five minutes of their waking lives they checked their answering machine? What if in this class I let off this article describing, students were all sitting there waiting for the class to start with their desk phones in their laps?

Do you know what I'm getting at here? Somebody would suggest throwing a net over people that did that. But that's what we're doing now and nobody bats an eye. This phone thing has really taken over, and because it is so nice and small like it is I don't think it is hitting people just how remarkable a phenomenon, and how big a change from before, it is.

And it is not just the phone. The phone is one element in a larger phenomenon, the social media. As far as I can tell, with few exceptions my students are all exhibiting themselves on their Facebook page, connecting with others' Facebook pages, and tweeting their thoughts to the world in 140-character bursts. And that's going on all day, every day, 24/7 except for sleep time. And many of them are regular Skype users. (I don't plan on getting into Skype here, but I invite readers to think about the impact of its wide spread use.) I think of a student I work with one-on-one—bright, charming, alert—who told me that on her free days from school, say on a Saturday, she's likely to start early in the morning and social media--to use the term as a verb--all day until she goes to bed. She works on her Facebook page, which has 651 friends, she proudly tells me. She cruises and contributes to other Facebook pages. She tweets and texts. She Skypes her mother and her boyfriend in another city. She might go to the mall in the afternoon to do some shopping, but the cell phone goes with her. Anytime she studies she's multitasking—social media accompanies the activity. At least for people her age, she told me, if you don't have a social media presence, for all practical purposes you don't exist. She wants to exist.

I'm taking in this social media phenomenon from a distance. I'm personally not a part of it. I'm seriously hearing impaired and can't use a phone of any kind. A student has had to show me all the

things you can do with a cell phone. I've seen a grand total of one Facebook page in my life, and I've never texted or tweeted or Skyped. I have had no association with LinkedIn or the myriad of other manifestations of the revolution in personal communication.

Not being part of something can cut both ways in terms of trying to make sense of it. Of course, someone's lack of firsthand experience with whatever-it-is can result in his or her missing the point of what's going on, and indeed, that well could be the case with me. On the other hand, being on the outside looking in can give someone a fresh--call it anthropological or sociological--perspective on some matter. For example, keen insights about this country have come from visitors to our shores; their foreignness allowed them to see us with new eyes, as it were, something those of us immersed in this society and culture haven't had since we were toddlers. I don't know which of the two, or combination of the two--fresh insight versus uninformed misread--applies to what I offer here about the educational implications of social media, the topic of this writing. Plus I'm old, and for all I know, out of it. One thing I might have going for me is decades-long experience as a professor teaching college students--the group I focusing on in this writing--and I like to think I am informed on educational matters and have a well-honed analytical capability.

Whether or not I have the details straight, I am convinced that there is nothing more important going on the lives of my university students that needs to be understood than the social media. I have decided that rather than remain silent on this topic due to my limitations, or presumed limitations, I'll put my observations on the table and let readers decide what they are worth and what to do with them. My hope is that this writing can serve as a frame of reference and conceptual base from which others more able than I in this area can go beyond what I am able to offer here.

A major premise behind this presentation is that in order to understand any medium we need to come to grips its nature as a form of communication. Television, say: indeed it matters what is *on* television--the particular program, news or entertainment or sports, whatever it is. But even more important is to understand the personal and public impact of television itself--this particular technology, the box with the screen, the remote control, turning it on and off, sitting in front of it watching pictures and hearing sound

in that way, the way programming is disseminated, the relationship watchers have to it, this sort of thing.

The late media scholar, Marshall McLuhan's famous aphorism captured this orientation and reality: *the medium is the message*, he pointed out. Note that message has two pronunciations and that both apply in this context. The message, the point, of television lies in the medium itself; and, as well, the medium of television massages viewers, it kneads, alters, conditions them, and it significantly shapes collective reality.

Neil Postman, another prominent media scholar who has also passed, noted that the various media embody and foster values, preferences, predilections, ways to be. They teach you what is good and bad and who you are and what matters and how to come at things. For those who get caught up in them, the forms of the media are no less than ways to hold the meaning of their lives. Apart from what picture of yourself you put on your Facebook page and what you tell the world about yourself on it, the very act of Facebooking, that way of engaging the world, has consequences in just about every area of your life you can name. Whatever you tweet about, the very act of tweeting your thoughts in 140-character snippets affects you in all sorts of ways. Indeed, making sense of media--including, and as far as I'm concerned, especially, social media--is serious business.¹

Anything so ubiquitous in the lives of my students must be serving their basic human needs, or at least their wants as they perceive them. Human beings are motivated to be visible to their world, to express themselves and be heard and taken into account by others, to be approved and respected by other people, to be included in the group and to feel part of things, and to find companionship and love and sex. And they need, or want at least, to have a good time. And they want newness, variety, some action in their lives.

Its obvious the social media are ways to serve those needs and wants of college age people, the focus of this writing, and other people as well. Social media works. That is a first point to keep in mind. It gets good things done for people.

At least in the short run it works, and in part it works (in part it doesn't work)--that's where the catch comes in. Something can provide a payoff--or a partial payoff, good enough--for twenty minutes, or an evening, or even the whole of this week, but in the

long run bring us down. Ask anybody who drinks: tonight is great, but tomorrow there's the hangover and the vague memory of what you did, oh no! And eventually the pink slip, the divorce, and the liver trouble or esophageal cancer. But hey, there's a way to be happy right now. So get to it, straight up.

It may seem hyperbole to talk about the social media and alcohol and drug abuse in the same breath, but while these phenomena are different in degree they are not different in kind. It's not just heroin that hooks us and brings us down, or at least makes us pay a cost that gets in the way of living as well as we might. So too can food, shopping, spectator sports, gambling, television, video games, autoeroticism, and yes, social media. They share characteristics: a quick fix with minimal effort (easy enough to eat a dozen Dunkin' Donuts); the later big price tag (with the donuts, obesity, fatigue, depression, self-disdain, inactivity, clogged arteries, diabetes, and so on); and being out of control—the activity controls you, you don't control it. If you are hooked into social media, try stopping for a day and see how it goes.

Students tell me that social media are a way for them to stay in touch with their friends and family, and that they lift their mood and make their days go better, and I know that's true, and that's really good. But everything has a downside. Nothing is an unmitigated positive thing, and we are all better off to the extent that we know both the upsides and downsides of anything we do, particularly anything that takes up a lot of our time and energy. I don't hear students discussing the costs of social media involvement, and that gives me pause.

Economists have a term that serves us here: the *unintended negative consequence*. The idea is that something can have a good outcome, say some social program, but before we decide how far to go with it, we need to think through the unintended negative consequences of it. Government welfare programs are often used as an example. Assistance to people in need is good; indeed, it can have positive consequences. But, and here's the rub, it can also have negative consequences: increased dependency in the people assisted, lowered personal responsibility and initiative, higher illegitimacy and family breakup rates, and so on.

With the understanding that social media results in a lot of positive outcomes for people, I'm going to use this space to list some unintended negative educational outcomes of heavy involvement

with social media for the students I teach at the university. The generalization, the thesis, which holds all this together is that, in my view, social media inhibits important scholarly capabilities, predilections, and accomplishments.

A lot of contemporary writing involves numbered lists—“6 Ways to Improve Your Chances of Getting the Job,” and so on—which, incidentally, I suspect has been prompted by the medium of the Internet. In any case, I’ll employ that format here. I’ve identified 10 concerns, or worries, which, as a university professor, I have about the impact of the social media on my students. See what you think:

1. *The Opportunity Cost.* Another economic concept. One way to compute the cost of anything you are doing is the value of everything else you could have been doing instead. If you are sprucing up your Facebook account, you are not spending an afternoon curled up reading Dostoyevski or Proust or learning math or science or history. You are not taking a long walk in the woods and learning Nature’s truths. You are not engaged in serious solitary thought and reflection. Good university students realize that this time in their lives is their opportunity to sculpt themselves into something true, informed, powerful, and directed, and that time is of the essence in getting at this enterprise with all they have in them. Diddling around with social media obscures and trivializes and undercuts this crucially important, life-determining project.

2. *Never Completely in the Room.* With the media, you are always someplace other than in this place, here, now. You are always in the larger virtual world. I sense my students’ attention, focus, is never quite on this classroom and what we are doing. Whatever is going on in class, their reality includes the person they just texted and the return text they anticipate and are dying to check but can’t. At the same time they are in their dorm room reading about the Council of Trent, they are tweeting about a concert coming up. Being a good student involves intense, focused, single-pointed concentration. Social media get in the way of that.

3. *“Let Me Tell You What I Think.”* Being a good student involves learning about what other people think, about philosophy or art or literature or political science or any of the other academic areas.

It's about what Immanuel Kant thought, not what you think. It's about being referenced in other people and understanding them on their terms, and working with that, gaining insight into it and giving it meaning and using it to enrich you and produce worthy scholarship. In contrast, social media are centered on off-the-top commentaries and self-references. They are about what I think, what I prefer, how the world looks to me. They are about telling my story and letting people know what somebody else's story brings up for me. Subjective truth, what's true for me, my opinion, my reactions, takes precedence over the search for the truth outside myself. Social media prompt engaging other people's ideas just enough for it to prompt what I want to say about myself with regard to whatever, whoever, it is. This pattern has been strikingly prevalent in my courses in recent years. For so many students in our time, it's not about what Thomas Jefferson thought but rather what I think about Thomas Jefferson. Very bad.

4. *Easy Does It.* Tapping tiny little keys with your thumbs, no heavy lifting in that. In fact, effortlessness is a central value in social media, as well as one of its appeals. Another social media value, although it wouldn't be stated this way: shallowness. No need to be digging deeply into anything, getting eyestrain preparing anything. A quick skim if that, get it out there quick, that's enough, that's fine, move on. On the other hand, education involves in-depth investigations of the world. Education is more and more precise encounters with reality. Education's all about preparation and deferral of immediate rewards and working harder than you thought possible for you. It's about taking your time and doing things exactly right and not letting go of the work until it's completed. It's about patient and persistent mastery of a field or discipline. Education done right is just the opposite of easy does it; it's hard does it.

5. *Affinity for Pop Culture.* The social media messages (both pronouncements) its participants in the direction of the popular culture. Being on top of contemporary mass entertainment and its ways is a major value in social media, and knowing the latest singer and band and summer blockbuster movie and having a favorite contestant on "The Voice" is a good way to get that across. Education, in contrast, is about, or should be about, what the late

philosopher Russell Kirk called “permanent things.” That is to say, the finest, most evolved, artistic creations and their associated living patterns over the span of human history. Social media are about the timely. Education has nothing against the timely, but it doesn’t want to get lost in the timely at the expense of the timeless.

6. *“Nowism.”* The social media are all about this time, now. Yesterday’s gone, what’s on for today, that’s the ticket. Education is about the continuity of past, present, and future. Now is not the only time that matters. To understand today, and what tomorrow might bring, and simply to live well, you have know the human heritage, the best (and worse) of what went on before you arrived on the scene, and you don’t get that done musing on the Internet. The educational challenge is to become familiar with the very best that has accomplished in the past, and then, with a clear sense of who you are what you want to be like and what you want the world to be like, go beyond it.

7. *Puts You In Show Business.* Those Facebook pages put you and Jimmy Kimmel in the same line of work; you are both in show business. You and Jimmy are both engaged in self-promotion, exhibiting yourself in such a way as to get attention and go over big with your audience and be popular. Popularity is a major value in the world of social media; get that lineup of friends expanded, get a lot of action coming your way. So how do you get popular? There are some rules for success in show business that both you and Jimmy have to follow. A big one, tailor your presentation to what your audience believes and likes and to what makes them feel good about themselves. Mirror your audience’s style and predispositions and do it in an upbeat, clever-but-still-nonthreatening, and appealing way. Stay within your audience’s frame of reference and keep things clear and easy to understand and unambiguous; don’t make your audience feel liker losers or dumb. Don’t challenge your audience or put it down. Don’t make people feel they need to change anything about themselves or do anything other than what they are doing or work real hard at something. Jimmy’s audience knows he’s never going to turn on them and say something like, “What the hell are you doing lolling on a couch in a darkened room eating Korn Kurls watching me? Get a life,” and don't you do anything like that. In show business it’s important to come across as

attractive and cool. Jimmy's cool, and his audience must be cool to be around anybody as cool as Jimmy, and you're cool and your Facebook friends must be cool to be around you. Much of social media involves entertaining and being entertained--show business. Needless to say, education isn't about entertainment, or it shouldn't be. Scholars shouldn't just reiterate what people already believe or make them feel good about themselves and their lives. Sometimes in scholarship you have to get outside people's frame of reference, and let them in on the fact that reality isn't always simple and clear and unambiguous. Sometimes in education you are compelled to bring your audience up short and tell them something they don't want to hear. Sometimes what you have to tell people will get you rejected and even expelled from your circle. And sometimes you just have to quit wagging your tail and licking people's cheeks and let the truth fly. But so be it, because popularity isn't the name of the game in education: reality is.

8. *Imprecise Word.* Education is about, to perhaps coin a term, Precise Word. That is, words, both written and spoken, are used with utmost care to name the world, exactly, completely, objectively, with precision. Social media, in contrast, is about Imprecise Word. Tossed off, ungrammatical, on-impulse tweets. Chatty, informal, two-line text messages. Imprecise Word seems to be coming on strong in our time. I have noted a major difference, and diminishment, in my students' use of, and capability with, words, with language. Their emails to me are much shorter, muddier conceptually, and, seemingly, written more carelessly (care-less, done without care) than just a few years ago. In times past, when I wrote recommendation letters for students, they would email me to let know they appreciated my gesture. No more. Before, when I emailed students asking them to reply confirming an appointment with me, they would do that. Not now. Somehow, you don't write that kind of thing now. Do I think the social network culture explains these changes in pattern? I can't be sure of course, but yes, I suspect it does. Do these changes, which could seem inconsequential, matter for anything? I think they do. A major language-related problem I'm experiencing is students' inability to understand course texts compared to five or ten years ago. It is so pronounced that I'm certain I'm not imagining things. I'm taken by students' inability to understand an author. Perhaps they just

aren't reading the material now—they say they are, but maybe they are putting me on—or it could be they just don't like to read anything of any complexity now. Whatever is going on, I can't assume that students will come away with an understanding sense of writing that is the least bit sophisticated. Too, much more now, students—and they do it respectfully—express displeasure with long readings—and, these days, a couple of chapters, or even one healthy one, is long to them. Perhaps the social media, and the Internet and the video games and the bang-bang-bang movies they watch, do shorten their attention spans. More, student writing seems more disjointed and illogical and kind of tossed-off than before. It could be as simple as if you spend your time tapping out quick exclamations of whatever is on your mind at the moment, and you don't attend to anything more than an instant or two, and you skim what you read to get the gist of it because that is all you need to get your social media business accomplished, you stay stuck right there, at that level. In the old days, everybody wrote long, detailed letters and dropped them in a mailbox and waited for equally long and detailed letters back. In the old days people read long books in an easy chair. Does anybody write long letters these days—my students don't even do emails—or plow through long books? If writing is staying within the confines of 140-character public pronouncements, and reading is perusing web site pages and Facebook accounts, is it reasonable to expect anything other than what I'm calling Imprecise Word? Wherever it is coming from, as an educator it's bothering me in a big way.

9. *Groupthink*. I find students these days to be remarkably alike in how they see things and what they believe, significantly more so than before. As I listen to them talk and read their writings, a word pops to the surface of my consciousness: groupthink. There are a lot of reasons for what's going on, including the way schools at all levels have gotten into the thought management business in a major way in recent years, but one of them, I believe, is social media. Social media breed a collective, identity; you become a member of a virtual community. Membership in any community comes at the cost of autonomy and true individuality. That is particularly the case with the social media because in that community you are never private. You are always on display: nine o'clock on a Thursday night, there you are, they can see you. Your life becomes

increasingly transparent. You live perpetually in public. A life in public contributes to an increased need to belong, and the way to belong is to go along with the crowd, conform. Social media involves self-disclosure. The more you talk about yourself--in any context, not just the Internet--the more you reveal about yourself, especially negative self-disclosures, the more subject you are to control by others. Social media breeds a kind of networked intelligence: accepted, and acceptable, thought is whatever the wisdom of the collective happens to be. Morality becomes shared morality. Truth, proof, becomes social, what everybody knows, what is in the wind, or better, what is in cyberspace. Education at its best liberates the individual mind; all too much, I worry, social media ensnares it.

10. *Why Grow Up?* Education is about the quest for maturity. The university, not so long ago, was a place for people who wanted to become grown-ups. I get the sense that the social network works against that, at least for the university-age students I'm referencing here. There is a stress in social media on youth, newness, immaturity. Universities have become places for pre-adults—you start as one and graduate as one with your cap with the tassel tipped back--and I speculate that social media has something to do with that. Why it is going on, and to whatever extent social media contributes to it, the self-presentations of university students nowadays are noticeably more immature, benign, and innocuous than in years past. To put it in the starkest terms, students that used to be young men and women are now kids; in fact, they call themselves kids, college kids. We all have to figure out how to pitch who we are to the world, and to ourselves, and many people these years have decided to “play it young,” and I speculate that the social media is pushing them in this direction, which is not to say it is the only thing doing that. If social media are prompting this personal, and collective (*we are kids*), identity, and the actions that stem from that, what does the future hold? Assuming that the social media are going to remain central in the lives of today's college students in the years ahead, are we going to have thirty- and thirty-five year old pre-adults up the line, and what consequence is that going to have for our private and public lives? I leave that to readers to explore.

Those are my ten concerns. So what happens now? The answer to that question, it seems to me, depends on who you are.

If you are interested in ideas and getting clear about things, you could review what I have offered here and fix it, make it better, and take it farther, deeper, than I did, and let the world know what you've come up with.

If you are a teacher, let's say of university students, and I think this discussion applies to secondary students as well, you could incorporate these observations into your teaching. My thinking on that is, right down the line, items one to ten, to counteract the negative outcomes of heavy social media involvement. You don't accommodate to it, play by its rules, emulate it, you compete with it, you provide an alternative to it and offer your students a rationale that you share with them that supports what you are doing. You can fill in the details, but the idea is that is if the social media is about what I think, your class is about learning to take in what other people think, and from their perspective, not yours; quit relating everything to yourself. Your class is about the worth of hard does it, not easy does it. And learning to focus. And learning about the preciousness of time and using it wisely. And about the past and the future and their connection to the present. And about alternatives to living your life in show business. And the Precise Word. And thinking for yourself. To the extent you can, you become a living example of what it means to educate yourself and grow into an independent, self-determining, informed, purposeful, and effective adult.

If you are a university student and somehow came to read this, I invite you to take charge of your life. Get off automatic pilot, wake up, figure out what's going on in your life, decide what you want to make out of yourself and your existence, and go from there. If you like what social media is doing for you, and how it is setting you up for the time ahead, great, stick with it, increase your involvement if you want, it's your life. If you don't like the cost you are paying for what you are getting from social media—or video games, television (including commercial sport shows), the Internet, the pop music industry, the movie industry, any of the media—decide what is best for you to do and do that. One of the tacit messages of the media is that you have no choice around them. They are bigger than you are; you have to have them in your life. No you don't. The secret they have been hiding from you is that

you are bigger than they are. A good first step is to declare to yourself that you are a free human being and to sit still for the next couple of minutes and experience what that feels like, and then to carry that feeling with you for the rest of your day.

Notes

1. Two classic books on the media are underpinnings for this writing: Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message* (Ginko Press, 1995); and Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Penguin, 2005). The most helpful recent book on this topic has been Andrew Keen, *Digital Vertigo: How Today's Online Social Revolution Is Dividing, Diminishing, and Disorienting Us* (St. Martin's, 2013).