

# Social Media

Is being better connected  
undermining our relationships?

**T**he way we communicate has changed out of all recognition in the last 20 years. The internet, smartphones and social media enable us to connect with people around the world and receive a reply instantly where it might previously have taken days or required an expensive phone call. Not only that, but we can have hundreds or even thousands of 'friends', far more than we could keep up with in real life, posting messages to them and receiving updates in our social media feeds.

We have the ability to communicate more quickly and conveniently than ever before. We are better connected, and to more people, than has ever been possible.

For Christians, there are questions about how we engage with these powerful technologies and allow them to impact our lives – and particularly how they affect our relationships with God and other people.



Thinking Biblically About...

# What's the problem?

The changing face of communication has far-reaching consequences. It is easy to stay in touch with people, maintaining relationships that would otherwise be difficult or impossible. It can save time, enabling us to access information we need quickly and giving us more to spend with friends and family, and with our communities of faith.

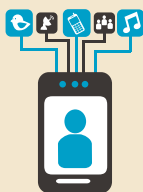
But it can also bring problems. The technologies that help us to communicate more easily can somehow end up undermining other relationships.



UK adults spend an average of **8 hours 41 minutes per day** on media devices (including TV, laptop and mobile) – more than they sleep.



The average smartphone user checks their device **every six minutes**, or around 150 times a day.



The average Brit has **four social media accounts** and spends a total of 1 hour 20 minutes a day on them.

## We can end up being flooded with information that constantly interrupts what we are doing, distracting us from other tasks, conversations and even sleep and prayer

The rise of social media raises many issues for Christians. We can end up being flooded with information that constantly interrupts what we are doing, distracting us from other tasks, conversations and even sleep and prayer. The unending stream of updates can fill all of the time we have available, crowding out time for other relationships and activities. More subtly, the way we present ourselves on social media can be a carefully-edited version of ourselves as we seek to project a particular image to others; in the worst cases, we can become obsessed with our online persona and the way people engage with it.

What biblical principles can we apply to our use of social media?

**Q:** To what extent do you actively question your use of social media and other communications technologies?

# Neither good, nor bad, nor neutral

Technologies are expressions of the world that God has created. It is therefore tempting to suggest that a given technology itself is as neutral as the laws of physics and maths on which it is built – but the reality is more complicated.

## ‘Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.’

Melvin Kranzberg,  
History of technology professor

As Melvin Kranzberg suggests, in practice any technology is an expression of the values – including spiritual values – of those who create it and use it. Implicitly or explicitly, these values are built into the application and influence how we use them.

Neither is human nature neutral. We are fallen beings (Genesis 3:6) and are innately prone to sin. On the other hand, we were also created as social and relational creatures, and these technologies implicitly hold out the promise of making us better communicators, better at relating to one another, and therefore perhaps even more human and more godly.

Complicating matters is the way that the web and its associated technologies have permeated everything. Social media has become so much a part of our culture and lives that the full extent of its effects can be hard to spot; as the Chinese proverb goes, ‘If you want a definition of water, don’t ask a fish’. Much of the time our use is so assumed or reflexive that we don’t even recognise it consciously. But given the power of social media and the fact that it saturates every waking hour and every area of life, how could it *not* have any spiritual impact?

If you want a definition of water, don’t ask a fish



# What does the Bible say?

**Technology is always about power. The Bible has much to say about the way power is exercised, and about the ability that technology gives us to do so. It recognises that technology can be used to control people and enslave them. The Philistines prevented the Israelites from using iron, for example, because of the advantages it gave them in warfare (1 Samuel 13:19-21).**

These inherent power dynamics inform the way we engage with social networking and other communications technologies. As users of these technologies, we can in principle apply the new abilities they offer us to communicate more effectively and maintain better relationships with others – or, more likely, we can become subject to the values embedded in them.

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## Technology is always about power

Like other technologies, the web and social media represents a redistribution of power from the gatekeepers – the authorities who previously controlled information and enabled communication – to ordinary people. We can contact people quickly and cheaply, wherever they are and at any time of day. Previously, we would have relied on telephone calls or letters.

Thanks to platforms like Twitter we can now find out what is going on around the world, directly from citizens on the ground, rather than relying on official news outlets. This has a variety of benefits, including exposing human rights injustices that would previously have gone unreported.

However, when used uncritically we can find ourselves unwittingly impacted for the worse by these technologies. They often carry certain expectations or foster particular habits, and we may not question these very deeply. In this way, we are influenced by them in ways we might not have anticipated or wanted. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6, “I have the right to do anything” – but I will not be mastered by anything.’

In Matthew 22:34-40, Jesus explains that the purpose of everything in the Bible is to foster right relationships: love for God, and love for neighbour. ‘All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’ This gives us a lens through which to view the way we engage with social media, exploring its impacts on our relationships with God and with other people. These may be both positive and negative. The challenge is to discern the effects and be deliberate about our engagement.

## Better stewards

At its best, there is something enormously liberating about social media. The ability to connect with other people, wherever they are around the world – and, thanks to translation software, sometimes even regardless of language – has the capacity to draw us closer together by emphasising our shared humanity over any differences of nationality or accidents of geography. Social media has made the world a smaller place and helped many people to re-establish the idea of community, albeit in redefined form. It serves as a reminder of the principle Paul states in Acts:



*'From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.'*  
(Acts 17:26)

The ability to connect with others can have profound consequences for our spiritual freedom, and – critically – for the freedom of those with whom we are in relationship. Social media-based church communities are a good example of this, especially in countries hostile to the gospel. It also has implications for political freedoms. Decentralisation of power is a key principle in the Bible, something God

built into the Israelites' structures of government and justice after their experiences as slaves under Pharaoh in Egypt. The king and the state were not all-powerful.



*When the king takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.*  
(Deuteronomy 17:18-20)

The web and social media can have a levelling effect on otherwise unaccountable authorities. This has broader implications, since the nature of a country's government plays a key role in guaranteeing its citizens' religious freedoms, or otherwise – China being an obvious example.

On another level, we have never been more informed as consumers. We are able to research every purchase and every significant decision we make online, reading reviews from other customers about products, services and companies from books to mortgage deals and insurers. We no longer have to believe what we are told by the vendors; the web brings transparency and accountability in commerce and finance as well as politics. We can be better stewards of the financial resources God has given us, thereby reducing debt, having more money to give to charity, and more to spend on family and other priorities.

**Q:** What are some of the positive ways social media has impacted both your life and the lives of those you interact with?



## Always-On: distraction, time and identity

On the other hand, there are a number of problems and temptations that come with ubiquitous social media. One of the issues is that the unending and persistent nature of social media updates can prove a constant distraction and can take our time and attention away from other activities. It is not uncommon to see people pull out a phone in the middle of a conversation with someone, or even in church.

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*'High-tech jugglers are everywhere – keeping up several e-mail and instant message conversations at once, text messaging while watching television and jumping from one website to another while plowing through homework assignments. But after putting about 100 students through a series of three tests, the researchers realized those heavy media multitaskers are paying a big mental price. "They're suckers for irrelevancy... Everything distracts them." – Stanford University study*

Compromising our ability to relate by sensitising the mind to distraction undermines our ability to love. Obviously, if we cannot be silent and at ease with ourselves, this has implications for our ability to pray, worship and engage with our faith.

In the Bible, the Sabbath was supposed to be a day of rest, on which people would not merely stop paid or necessary work but use the time to honour God. 'Rest' did not just mean inactivity or recreation: it was an opportunity to reconnect with God after the busyness of the week.



*'Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work... Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.'*  
(Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

The Sabbath was not an optional luxury: it was a core part of the Israelites' identity and failing to observe it was a form of idolatry. The danger is that we allow social media to distract us and detract from our time and capacity to pray and spend time with God.

Lastly, the image we project online raises questions about our identity. We often work hard to present an idealised picture of ourselves through carefully-chosen words and photos – but one that is ultimately false. The Bible has much to say about integrity and our character. 'Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.'  
(Matthew 7:17-18)

# Where do we go from here?

**Social media and communications technology are pervasive and impact almost every area of life. Our use of them can be reflexive and unthinking. The challenge is therefore to engage with them deliberately and critically.**

One thing to remember is that 'social networks' are not all the same. Marshall McLuhan, a philosopher of communications theory, coined the term 'The medium is the message': that the nature of the platform shapes the way we engage with the content. Twitter's 140-character limit, Facebook's emphasis on images and LinkedIn's appeal to the business community all lead to different types of communication, community and behaviour.

How we go about aligning our use of social media with our faith is not a simple matter of using or avoiding one or other application. However, there are several questions we can ask ourselves about the impact they have on us, other people, and our relationship with God, that can guide our collective and personal responses. These may include:

- At the most basic level, are we in full control of our use of the internet and social media? Social media exerts a powerful force, impacting our time,

emotions and relationships. "I have the right to do anything" – but I will not be mastered by anything.' (1 Corinthians 6:12) If not, a regular social media 'fast' might be a way of regaining a sense of perspective.

- Are we passive consumers of updates, or do we actively engage with other people and further those relationships?
- Even in a 24/7 culture, there are only 24 hours in a day. One key challenge is that we balance the amount of time spent on our online relationships with the needs of our offline relationships – and make sure that we don't inadvertently allow the former to come at the expense of the latter.
- What is our attitude towards our online image? How much do we care about the way other people see us and engage with our profile? There can be something extremely self-focused and obsessive about our use of social media, bordering on idolatrous in some cases – the narcissistic search for the perfect selfie or photo that communicates the image we want to project.
- Are we the same person online as we are offline, or do we project a different character – intentionally or otherwise? This is ultimately a matter of honesty and integrity.



**Q:** What do you think the spiritual impacts of your use of social media are – and how might you change them to align better with your faith?

# What does the Bible tell us about Social Media?



- The web, smartphones and social media permeate almost every waking hour and area of our lives. Anything so powerful and pervasive must have spiritual consequences.
- These technologies allow us to communicate better, holding out the possibility of maintaining and deepening relationships with each other and even enabling us to walk more closely with God.
- However, there are many pitfalls and our 'Always-On' culture can easily consume our time and distract us from more meaningful relationships.

**Thinking Biblically About...** is a series of 2,000-word guides that unpack modern-day issues from a biblical perspective. The **TBA** series aims to give Christians a firm foundation for engaging with some of the most difficult questions of our times: money and debt, sex and marriage, how we spend our time, how we treat the environment and what the role of government ought to be.

You can also read our **Long Distance Christian** series, a collection of 10,000-word booklets looking at key issues in more depth.

**The Jubilee Centre** is a Christian social reform charity based in Cambridge, UK. We believe that the Bible's teaching applies to every area of modern life and has enduring relevance for Britain and the world in the 21st century. At the heart of this social vision is a concern for right relationships, expressed by Jesus in his summary of the Old Testament, *'Love the Lord with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-40)

Find out more at [www.jubilee-centre.org/social\\_media](http://www.jubilee-centre.org/social_media)