Mindfulness in the social media age

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No matter what you might think of social media, one thing is certain: it's here to stay. There has been a recent spate of books and articles asserting that social media is changing everything, and the question begging for an answer is whether these changes to our lives and society at large are for the better or not. It's not a question easily answered.

Greta Van Susteren defines the magnitude of these changes in her new book, *Everything You Need to Know About Social Media (Without Having to Call a Kid)*, in her opening paragraph:

We are living through a revolution. The revolution is bigger than the Industrial Revolution, bigger than the automotive revolution, bigger than the great space race. This revolution isn't just changing how we do things, or where we can go, or how we work. It is fundamentally changing how we communicate with and relate to one another.

Social media's impact can be felt across the global spectrum, completely transforming the way businesses and governments are run to how we produce and receive the news and entertainment to how we relate with our families and friends.

Consider this past presidential election, which could arguably be called our first social media presidential election. Donald Trump was the only candidate who seemed to instinctively understand the power of Twitter. When asked by Greta Van Susteren back on April 3, 2016, whether he ever planned to stop using Twitter, Trump acknowledged how he'd utilized social media to gain an advantageous bully pulpit.

"It's like owning my own newspaper," he replied, which statistically is about right. At that point, the Republican nominee had nearly 8 million followers on Twitter, 7 million on Facebook, and 2 million on Instagram. He added, "I have like sixteen, seventeen million people. That's like owning the *New York Times* without the losses. Why would I give it up?" President Trump now has more than 50 million followers on Twitter.

A Rasmussen poll in October 2016 found that almost half of all adults under age 40 got their news primarily or exclusively from the Internet and social media. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have become constant news sources for Internet users. Twitter, in particular, has become known for breaking news ahead of the traditional news media and often becomes part of the story. Classic news formats can't deliver the immediacy of news events that social media can with its video and Twitter update capabilities, often from witnesses who are now potential news sources. In essence, with a smartphone in hand, everyone is now a reporter. The voices of the people around the globe are now being heard, building more awareness of issues and actually breaking the news themselves. Social media has created a more democratic space. It's all about the content you create and, if it's good, you will attract followers and be heard.

Possibly you will also become rich. Felix Kyellberg, a Swede who goes by PewDiePie, has been YouTube's recent top earner. With 53 million subscribers, he was pulling in \$15 million a year from his popular channel "playing video games with your bros."

But, now let's look at the flip side. Anyone who engages with a social media site will be on the receiving end of a tremendous amount of information without regard to its value or relevance or veracity. It will be hard, if not impossible, to keep your mind clear of clutter in this social media age.

Personally, I still like to start each day getting my information from newspapers, but I subscribe now to the digital version of three and am able to peruse them efficiently and less expensively. What's difficult is to control the torrent of news information that appears throughout the rest of the day and night on my Facebook feed or through tweets that are usually more distracting than useful and can easily become a time drain. I believe that it's critical that we each pay strict and careful attention to our intake of information and learn to hold at bay our exposure to all this modern stimuli.

Rolf Dobelli, a Swiss international bestselling writer, novelist, and entrepreneur, wrote about the need to focus in his latest book *The Art of the Good Life: 52 Surprising Shortcuts to*

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Happiness, Wealth, and Success. He writes that being able to focus is a skill critical to success in any field, yet we often are distracted today by what “others have selected for us”:

E-mails, Facebook updates, texts, tweets, alerts, news items from across the world, document hyperlinks, video clips on websites, and screens as far as the eye can see, in airports, train stations and trams—all of them vying for our attention. We’re ceaselessly entertained with sometimes banal, sometimes thrilling stories. We’re flattered, wooed and offered suggestions. And so we feel a little like kings, when in reality we should feel like spoon-fed slaves.

Dobelli holds the view that this gushing torrent of news that we consume on a daily basis is actually toxic to us and that this overabundance of information is equally hazardous to our health as an overabundance of food, which can result in diabetes and obesity. He believes that the news makes us passive and kills our creative spirit. Dobelli questions our modern desire for immediacy, our need to know about an event in real time, arguing that true insight and understanding takes time and benefits from the lens of hindsight. For the past 4 years, he’s elected to do without this daily onslaught of news flashes, preferring instead to read books and long magazine articles about world events, which benefit from true investigative journalism.

Dobelli wrote at length about the negative impact of news in an earlier book titled *The Art of Thinking Clearly: Better Thinking, Better Decisions*. “Information is no longer a scarce commodity,” he wrote. “But attention is. You are not that irresponsible with your money, reputation or health. Why give away your mind?”

I can’t quite imagine giving up reading or viewing news stories on a daily basis, but I try to limit the amount of time I allow myself to do so. I’m mindful of not getting too distracted by the information being pushed out to me, as well as not letting myself rush to a conclusion based on posts or tweets or news flashes.

Since the biggest users of social media are the young, they are also in jeopardy of information overload. I wonder whether it’s becoming more difficult for the young to learn to concentrate for long periods, because they are so accustomed to disrupted thought patterns that go along with being on social media and surfing the Internet. There is most definitely a dark side to social media, and potentially it’s most harmful to the youngest among us.

The renowned psychologist and author Dr. Jean M. Twenge’s recent book, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—And Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, offers a fascinating portrait of this first generation to pass their entire adolescence with a smartphone in hand. The device dominates everything from how they spend their time to their mental health. Social media, video games, and texting have begun to replace other activities that once defined teen life.

According to Dr. Twenge,

The advent of the smartphone and its cousin the tablet was followed quickly by handwringing about the deleterious effects of

“screen time.” But the impact of these devices has not been fully appreciated, and goes far beyond the usual concerns about curtailed attention spans. The arrival of the smartphone has radically changed every aspect of teenagers’ lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health. These changes have affected young people in every corner of the nation and in every type of household. The trends appear among teens poor and rich; of every ethnic background; in cities, suburbs, and small towns. Where there are cell towers, there are teens living lives on their cell phones.

A 2015 study by Pew Research Center found that nearly 75% of teens had access to smartphones, and research by Verto Analytics determined that teens unlock their devices about 95 times a day. One has to wonder whether teens are simply mimicking their parents when it comes to their smartphones. How often are adults checking into their virtual life on Facebook, ordering groceries and any item under the sun from Amazon, and relying on texting to communicate with friends and family?

The concern about the effects on young people of smartphone overuse and addiction has reached a fevered pitch. Just recently, two activist shareholders wrote a letter to Apple urging the company to be socially responsible in the face of a growing public health crisis of youth phone addiction. Though Apple and its rivals do allow parents some measure of control over which apps, content, and services their children can access, the group wants the company to be more proactive in helping parents protect their children with more helpful tools and options in the future.

Parents in this social media age are still grappling with the difficult decision of when to allow their children a smartphone, and it does seem that the direction seems to be trending younger and younger. It doesn’t help that tech companies have been more aggressively targeting younger customers. Google launched YouTube Kids in 2015, and Facebook just created Messenger Kids, a new version of its popular communications app, for 6- to 12-year-olds.

At whatever age a child does receive a smartphone and is allowed on social media sites, it’s imperative that there is some education that goes along with handing over the device. Education is key to teaching the young to be digitally literate, as well as mindful about maintaining responsible habits when it comes to technology use.

First, children need to understand the meaning of a digital footprint. They need to understand that activity online, from posts on social media accounts and comments left on various sites to tweets and retweets, accumulates over time to create an individual digital footprint, which by its very permanence can have serious repercussions for them down the road, both professionally and personally. This online portrait is more public than most of us realize. It is used today by companies to target their products at specific markets and consumers, by employers wanting to look into an applicant’s background, and by advertisers to track a user’s movements across websites. It’s vital, therefore, that children and teens understand that retweets and Facebook comments all leave a record and it is imperative for parents to check and consistently monitor the default privacy settings for them on any of their social media accounts.

Secondly, children need to know that just because they read something on the Internet doesn't mean that it's true. The Internet is not only immense but, according to Hobbes' Internet timeline, it's been doubling in size nearly every year, with a monthly growth rate of 10% to 15%. Anyone can publish on the Internet. Though the Internet certainly can be a valuable tool to obtain information and learn about things, children need to understand that there is also a lot of rubbish and misinformation published on the Internet. I tell my own children to discern between the "trash and treasure," and there is sometimes a good deal of trash to sort through to find the treasure. The better we prepare our children to critically question the information and media they are seeing, hearing, and

using, the more likely they are to make informed decisions and be learned citizens.

Finally, we as parents need to model the digital life skills that we want our children to possess. We need to be mindful not only of our own mental clutter due to information overload but that our children might be facing the same problem and that it could be affecting both their mental health and behavior adversely. It's important to talk with them about how we ourselves are managing the information overload that the Internet and social media thrust upon us and how we impose discipline on our screen habits. Most important, let them see us put away our smartphones and other devices altogether for long stretches of time and read a book or, even better, just be present.