

Are we losing sight of reality in an increasingly virtual world ?

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(Social media) allows us to present ourselves as our ideal: the person we would like everyone else to see.

(...) If we don't like what we see in the mirror (and increasingly, we don't) we can alter the lighting to conceal our pale skin, choose a flattering angle to hide our multiple chins and retouch our blemishes, until we no longer recognise the smiling, airbrushed faces staring back at us (...) But ultimately, can such a world be sustainable? If we are hiding behind a virtual persona whom we class better than ourselves, reality can only ever disappoint.

To this end, do the opportunities provided by social media, the Internet and related technology liberate us, or do they constrict our freedom? Moreover, in the virtual world we live in, are we really living at all?

On the surface, of course we are. If anything, social media and the wonders of the Internet have enhanced our lives, allowing us to keep in contact with those living on the other side of the world at the press of a button, instantaneously share ideas and information across continents and so much more. In moderation, social media is a powerful tool for communication, but also for inspiration, education and change.

But here lies the heart of the problem: there is no such thing as moderation, or if there is, it exists on a line we crossed long ago. Social media has transformed from a tool used to enhance and accompany our lives, to taking a key place at its forefront. Whilst the virtual ought to accompany and aid the real, the reverse is rapidly becoming a reality. Instead of a photo documenting an experience, experiences are created for the sake of Instagram or Facebook uploads. If there aren't pictures, it clearly didn't happen.

The damage caused by social media is far more than speculative, however. A 2013 study by the University of Michigan revealed that social media lowers self-esteem and induces loneliness, whilst a study based at the University of Essex this year found that young people who spend more time on social networking sites are more likely to be unhappy and suffer from mental illness. It seems paradoxical that websites facilitating social activity are to blame for increasing feelings of isolation and misery; after all, humans are nothing if not social animals. However, websites such as Facebook and Instagram subtly remind us of the fun other people are having (a very real FOMO), whilst the hollow nature of our hundreds of Facebook friends and the constructed nature of the lives we represent to the world are never far from the surface. Moreover, the social activity human beings instinctively yearn is not and has never been virtual. What we crave is actual love, affection and friendship, no matter how many strangers like our Instagram photos or follow us on Twitter.

As a result of our obsession with social media, our ideas of the social norm, what it is to have relationships, and even of time and our use of it are becoming completely skewed. We may be more well-connected, more knowledgeable and moving at a faster pace than our parents' generation, but whilst they were learning skills, reading books, having fun and making real, tangible relationships, we risk frittering away the hours staring at a screen.

We're all culprits, and frankly in a world so dominated by social media, how could we not be? To suggest we all 'switch off' would be naïve and unwise: there's no denying that social media and associated technologies are the future. However, it is essential that in the fast-moving virtual world, we don't lose sight of the important things that are rooted firmly in reality.

(640 words)