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ON ONLINE SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract. This paper attempts to investigate the reality of online social media and its impact on society and politics. It tackles the power and limits of online technology and analyzes the importance of online social media to democratic citizenship and its capacity to create wealth in the consumer world. However, it also argues that online relationships somehow reduce humans into cyborgs, and more fundamentally, it asserts that online technology—that flat world¹ phenomenon as Thomas Friedman calls it—has only increased the huge divide between rich and poor.

Keywords: online human relationships, politics of social media, virtual experience

Dangers of online social media

It is impossible to regulate the Internet and determine its content. The danger that online exposure brings does not come only from the presence of obscene materials but also from the lack of critical thinking therein. Although there are mature persons online who act with caution and care, most young people, however, in search of attention, tend to reveal too much of themselves in the Internet without understanding that they are making themselves potential victims of abuses and bullying. Thomas Friedman in his highly celebrated *The World is Flat* echoes this sentiment:

In a flat world, you can't run, you can't hide, and smaller and smaller rocks are turned over. Live your life honestly, because whatever you do, whatever mistakes you make, will be searchable one day. (Friedman 2005, 185)

The exposure of teenagers to online social media also exerts some influence on the kind of values that they embrace and develop. Crucial

to the individual is the formation of his sense of social commitment. This sense is not apparent in the Internet since what is available in social networking sites are mostly selfish and vain self-projections. While there is nothing wrong in self-expression, it is also important to be able to develop a more mature attitude toward things. A clear moral perspective is important in order not to diminish a person's sense of self when one exposes himself or herself publicly. Friedman notes quite rightly:

There is plenty to worry about in this future, from kids being lured by online sexual predators through their cell phones to employees spending too much time playing mindless phone games, to people using their phone cameras for all sorts of illicit activities. (Friedman 2005, 198)

In itself, the Internet is not evil. It is the information that one puts on the Internet and how that information is used that determines its value and purpose. Technology is nothing but a tool that propagates what is good and bad. Ultimately, people will have to be responsible with what they put online. Generally, social media can be a means to promote critical thinking, the common good and pluralist values. The value of freedom comes from how one uses it in order to form one's concept of the good. Any freedom that harms one's self or another is its aberration. For obvious reasons, the lack of regulation, protocol and clear moral norms online make the online environment a fertile ground for the malice and ill-intent of unscrupulous cabals and other criminal elements that prey on the innocent.

Authentic Human Relationships

Can people develop authentic human relationships online? While the dangers may be apparent, human commitment takes its roots from different angles. A simple gesture can sow the seed of a serious relationship that lasts a lifetime. It is wrong to say then that everything that happens online is bereft of substance and authenticity. It does not make you less of a human person when you use some chat room or when you use the online messenger service. Beyond the need to cure

boredom, expressing human feelings using the channel of this modern day means of social communication is also quite an experience worth considering.

Dr. Michio Kaku's 1997 book *Visions* elaborated on the possibility of man to cyborg relationships. In a way, human beings are so attached to their gadgets that they forget the dividing line between truth and fiction. This infatuation with the sweetness of modern existence has put to task our commonly held notions of human relations. Dr. Kaku writes:

Artificial intelligence envisions providing a robot with the capacity to 'love' its master, which would increase its commercial success and acceptability by the owner...when you bring one into your house, it will understand that you're the person it's there for, and that it had better keep you happy...It will care how you feel about its actions. It will try to please you in an apparently selfless manner because it will get a thrill out of this positive reinforcement. You can interpret this as a kind of love. (Kaku 1997, 91)

Our attachment to our mobile devices is like our attachment to some robot. These devices have replaced many things in our lives. They have also become powerful. They control everything in us. While we use gadgets and computers according to our specifications and compatibility requirements because these are tools designed to perform a particular function, the reality that we have been overly dependent on them is undeniable. We have actually fallen in love with them.

But computers do not have feelings. We cannot fall in love with a gadget. It is not love but manipulation. Love requires caring for someone and some form of reciprocity. We need computers but computers do not need us in order to function fully and performs its tasks. For instance, any new OS (Operating System) does not breathe fresh air the way humans do. The OS cannot become weary, bored or get tired listening to some useless stories. At the end of the day, we still seek the intimate presence of someone because being so in love

with some mobile device does not really make any sense. Michael Hyde argues:

All of us are cyborgs to some degree. It cannot be otherwise. The call of technology is embedded in our very existence. Day in and day out we find ourselves jacked into the instrumental matrix of the world of know-how. When was the last time you spent a day totally disconnected to any piece of technology? (Hyde 1995, 57)

The essence of real commitment is our face-to-face encounters with people. This means being able to live with them, suffer with them, and understand more what they are going through. For example, it can be said that any technology is nothing but a medium to make possible that contact with a real individual. A person is an embodied being, which means that his or her emotions are real insofar as these are expressions of bodily needs. When one feels hungry or thirsty, only something that is tangible satisfies this need. We have to be responsible for some person in a concrete way. Thus, responsibility, in this sense, goes beyond what is merely a virtual experience. But what is a virtual experience? Friedman says:

By virtual, the process of shaping, manipulating, and transmitting this digitized content can be done at very high speeds, with total ease, so that you never have to think about it – thanks to all the underlying digital pipes, protocols and standards that have now been installed. (Friedman 2005, 188-189)

In a classroom situation, for example, there is a deepening of relationship when the teacher meets his students. While knowledge and information can be imparted through technology-based tools, there is no replacement for the real experience of hearing, seeing, and communicating personally with the instructor. The classroom experience implies a sense of participation, a sense of being-with. As such, face-to-face encounters are crucial in the formative function of education. Hyde explains:

The relationship between technology and community is rooted first and foremost in the pragmatic workings of language. A conversation between two people, sitting face to face, and who are trying to discuss matters in a sincere, intelligible, appropriate and truthful way defines the simplest and politically purest form of free and respectful communion. (Hyde 1995, 60)

The politics of social media

According to Michael Hyde, “perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this point is found in the literature concerned with assessing how well the electronic media serves the institution of democratic politics.” (Hyde 1995, 62) Online social media is a potent political tool. It is an instrument that enables parties and stakeholders in any democratic forum or public sphere to reach out and enhance the awareness of people and develop in them a clearer sense of nationhood. It thus forms a huge part of building one’s sense of democratic citizenship.

Will Kymlicka maintains, for instance, “that people should happily embrace the call of democratic citizenship because the life of an active citizen is indeed the highest life available to us” (Kymlicka 2002, 294). More than that, we must also carry the burden to protect this highest form of life, which entails, among others, using all means possible in order to secure its perpetual enjoyment. The power of citizenship is something that comes from this shared aspiration.

The Arab Spring is a vital example of this power and how, by means of online social media, people can successfully topple some abusive regimes. Knowing the danger it can bring to vested political interests, powerful states like China implement strict censorship on social media and shut down various sites for fear of inciting rebellion against the ruling party. Mobile technology has kept strong states on their toes. The radical call toward more freedom online forms part, I believe, of the liberty of the moderns, which involves “the unimpeded pursuit of happiness in one’s personal occupations and attachments through the exercise of freedom from the exercise of political power” (Ibid., 295). Thus,

The 'mobile me' revolution will be complete when you can move seamlessly around the town, the country, or the world with whatever device you want. When this is fully diffused, the 'mobile me' will have its full flattening effect, by freeing people to truly be able to work and communicate from anywhere to anywhere with anything. (Friedman 2005, 196)

Hyde argues that "we are destined to hear and respond to the call of technology. And the quicker the better, especially if you hope to survive in a climate that may just well be a stage in the evolutionary struggle of survival of the fittest." (Hyde 1995, 65) There are no clear democratic ground rules for cyberspace. By means of blogs, tweets and online posts, people from cause-oriented groups, including individuals, can launch attacks against powerful political personalities. Political scandals become viral overnight and these affect the mindset of people and can change the fortunes of any powerful person.

What online social media has made possible then is some sort of a middle-class revolution. While the issues concerning equality, social justice and human rights do not reach the grassroots or the masses who are most of the time the vulnerable victims of inequality and socio-cultural hegemony, this middle class revolution has brought forth greater conscientization mainstream through the use of technology.

Capitalism and Social Media

We live in the digital age. According to Friedman, "by digital, work flow revolutions, all analog content and processes – everything from photography to entertainment to communication to word processing to architectural design to the management of my home lawn sprinkler system – are being digitized and therefore can be shaped, manipulated, and transmitted over computers, the Internet, satellites, or fiber-optic cable" (Friedman 2005, 188).

The use of information has advanced the greater cause of human well-being in various ways, including the convergence of talents, innovation, and technology globally. It has the potent force to bridge the gap between rich and poor, and transfer opportunities without the

necessity of physically moving people. This great “sorting out” as Friedman would like to call it has essentially defined the new norm for the century. Friedman writes:

For all of these reasons, the ceilings, walls, and floors that will define us in the future are likely to be blended models. That is, traditional nation-states, governments, corporations, and news organizations will have to work together with emergent networks and virtual communities and companies to gradually hammer out some new norms, new boundaries, for operating in the flat world. (Friedman 2005, 239)

So the world has shrunk. The creator of the Internet, who invented this modern day marvel as a cold war device, did not see it coming as a vehicle for capitalism. But since the early part of the new century, information technology has created vast wealth for many people, thereby giving birth to the most prominent billionaires in the world. Tech stocks have soared and produced fortunes before the IT (Information Technology) bubble at the latter part of the millennium. However, IT has regained its place in Wall Street and has continued to propel the world's knowledge-driven economy. The digital world has revolutionized everything.

The above is the macro perspective of a consumption-based economy. Entrepreneurial people conduct business transactions with ease using online platforms. While piracy remains to be a problem, most especially in the entertainment industry, online commerce provides noticeably a venue for some people to innovate and sell their goods and ideas online. Bill Gates, according to Friedman, envisioned Microsoft as that company making knowledge available at one's fingertips. However, a closer look at this phenomenon brings to light a sad fact that has not changed for a very long time. Somewhere, I echoed this sentiment:

The forces that have flattened the world, notably the computer, Netscape, the World Wide Web, outsourcing, in-sourcing, in-forming, the search engines, the microchip, and others are not things that you can buy in a wet

market. As noble as they are, these things are instruments of business and enterprise. Still, a flat-world economy is run by money and greed, and more than the convergence that it seeks to achieve, the bottom line is profit and more profit. (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 1 May 2012)

More fundamentally, online technology has done nothing significant to decrease the gap between rich and poor. We are still a divided world of capitalists and the working class. If philosophy were to make an assessment of the impact of social media on the quest for a more egalitarian society, then I believe it must make practical and bold steps in highlighting how the information age has also widened the divide between rich and poor. As Peter Singer says, “the philosopher who does so will have to sacrifice some of the benefits of consumer society.”²² In this regard, I would like to make the point that still, “the world is not flat. It remains unreachable to millions of poor children, and many of them may not even see the beauty and wonder of life for they have been forced into becoming expendable slaves of a hegemonic value system that puts premium on money and achievement but neglect the basic humanity of each individual.” (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 1 May 2012)

For all intents and purposes, it is important to realize that modernity requires the embrace of novelty, scientific innovation, pluralism, toleration, and greater freedom. However, the impact of this knowledge-driven online economy is still to be felt by the poorest margins of society. Data from the World Bank still indicate widespread poverty and income inequality in the world. It does not help that those who are connected online live in the metropolis since most rural folks are the ones suffering from government neglect. Consumption still drives the phenomenon of information technology, and with it, what corresponds is corporate greed.

Thus, it can be concluded that, “Thomas Friedman is wrong to say that the world is always within one’s reach, or just a click away with the use of a mouse. Think, for instance, of people who live in the poorest provinces of the Philippines or workers who earn below the minimum wage and one will realize that the Internet is not readily available to all,” and so, overall, it is still a huge challenge for democratic citizens

like the most of us, for the online phenomenon does not necessarily translate to the common good, and “this is for the simple reason that the flat-world economy that Mr. Friedman is talking about is no more than the egocentric forces of capitalism that continue to hound the poor masses and keep them in oblivion and disease, ignored by their fellow human beings.”³

ENDNOTES

¹ For a detailed discussion on the flat world phenomenon, see Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005).

² Peter Singer, *Famine, Affluence and Morality*, in *Social Ethics*, ed. Thomas Mappes and Jane Zembaty (Boston: Mc-Graw Hill, 2002), 403.

³ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, “The World is not Flat,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 1, 2012.