Contact Information
Wendt Center for Character Education   563-589-3440 (office)
University of Dubuque   563-589-3243 (fax)
2000 University Avenue   wendt@dbq.edu (email)
Dubuque, IA 52001   wendt.dbq.edu (website)

Character and . . .
Social Media

Volume 1 / 2015

Character and Social Media

Annalee R. Ward

"Facebook Post Sparks Deadly Violence Against Ahmadis in Pakistan." A post of an allegedly "'obscene and objectionable picture of the Kaaba [Islam's holiest site] and a scantily clad woman'" resulted in a mob attack that killed a grandmother and her two young grandchildren and burned several homes to the ground. Social media—is it grounds for engaging responsible citizens or for prompting reactive violence?

Fantasy Football, a social media enabled game, can get heated in the competitive trash talking that characterizes so much of the interactions. But does that very trash-talking actually reveal character and promote community? For Dale Earnhardt Jr, it fostered a friendship with Dale Ives and led to Dale's becoming crew chief for Earnhardt.

A mother, frustrated with her teen daughter's behavior, sells her Katy Perry concert tickets on Facebook with the line, "spoiled brat daughter doesn't deserve these tickets . . . For Sale." Punishment, shaming, sharing. Parents use and abuse their children on social media. Do those actions reflect good character or even help foster character formation in their kids?

The articles in this journal take up these kinds of situations and carefully consider their implications for shaping the kind of people we are—shaping our character.

Attitudes toward Technology

Increasingly, life revolves around social media, the web, and "smart" technology. Anticipation abounds for the next greatest release to solve a problem we didn't know we had. As with changes in dominant media that have preceded us, language of fear and language of utopia run through discussions. The fearful proclaim that the only way to appropriately engage technology is to shun it. This view abandons critical engagement and God's call to be responsible stewards of His world. Optimistic voices invest great hopes in technology's abilities, often idolizing it. This view blunts our need to question the materialism inherent in technological development and the communal problems new technologies cause. Raising questions of stewardship or virtuous behavior may seem like an antiquated practice more useful for the out-of-touch, but it is most needed now given the decline in common values.

Raising questions of technology's place in our lives is not a new practice. For example, Neil Postman, an astute critic of how our use of particular media shape the way we think, cautions that we are becoming: ". . . [a] world in which the idea of human progress . . . has been replaced by the idea of technological progress" (70). He continues, "Technopoly . . . consists in the deification of technology, which means that the culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology" (71). If Postman is correct, then character formation questions need to be a part of this practice.

We see the technology concerns taken up in literature such as Orwell's *1984,* Huxley's *Brave New World,* and more recently in Dave Eggers' dystopian novel, *The Circle*. This book seems especially relevant as it evokes what Google might be becoming. He suggests a world that has gone technology crazy—a world that takes many elements of our on-line lives to logical extremes. In that society, people live by the mantras: "Sharing is Caring,

Privacy is Theft, and Secrets are Lies" (303). As you read Jenn Supple's article in particular, consider how these mantras are already embedded in many Facebook practices.

In this journal, we hope to offer a different voice than that of condemnation or naïve optimism—a voice of critical reflection. Reflective self-consciousness is often not welcome to the conversation, but it is necessary. Digging into God's world with thoughtfulness rather than easy sound bites or witty taglines rarely means discovering simplistic answers. In fact, when we pause reflectively, we end up examining our own attitudes and use of technology, specifically social media. We discover in those our own conflicted stances: we see good, we see harm. We see flawed human beings making great choices and making poor choices. We see possibilities for community building, but we also see technology's powerful potential for domination and destruction. How can we be thoughtful, responsible users?

Character and Social Media

Character—a concept at the heart of our actions—matters, perhaps more than ever, in our use of social media. In talking about character, we engage virtue(s) as central to forming ourselves and our society. Shannon Vallor asks the important question, "What impact will habitual use of new social media have on the development of users' *character,* and in particular, on their development of various social *virtues* essential to the good life?" (194). Because virtue is more than head knowledge, but is also rooted in excellent habits, concern about social media habits needs to be taken seriously.

Vallor highlights the virtues of patience, honesty and empathy as "communicative virtues," and explores their significance for social media (195). She worries that social media will harm real relationships and real communicative ability if they "are designed and driven by market pressures alone, with indifference to

communicative virtues and their essential role in developing and sustaining human connections" (200). While the very name "social media" suggests connectivity, experiencing it sometimes proves isolating and dissatisfying. The activity of "Facebooking" or "googling" or emailing or playing virtual games employs a disembodiment that cannot capture what happens in face-to-face encounters. Add to the issues what happens when the offer of anonymity is present, and we discover life-draining, vice-inducing practices with the potential to cause tremendous harm to relationships.

The question remains. How can we exercise excellent moral character on social media? I believe the answer lies in our worldview, in our attitudes, and in our habits.

By worldview, I mean our deep commitments and understandings of who we are as human beings. When we begin in the knowledge that God created us in his image as beloved and valued, our interactions with others should be seen through that lens. We don't want to objectify, belittle or otherwise cause harm to another human being—one who bears the image of the holy and divine. Nevertheless, at times we all act as if we've forgotten that. That's where we need God's grace to "reboot" through repentance and acceptance of his grace to move forward.

Secondly, our attitudes toward technology need to be revisited regularly. By reminding ourselves that technology is not, and cannot be our savior, nor is it solely an unredeemable enemy, we practice an alert awareness of its strengths and weaknesses. This critical mindset equips us to fight off the assaults of "gotta have" or "never use" with discernment. By checking our attitudes, we begin to rightly align our desires as those which ought to seek the good of others. This challenge is perhaps best summarized by Stephen Monsma, et. al.: "Responsible technology must rest upon a servant-like commitment to love God above all and one's neighbor as oneself" (244). The attitude of service directs us

toward better goals and ultimately helps develop better character.

The third practice we need in order to grow an appropriate practice of moral character on social media lies in examining and challenging our habitual use of it. A focus on habits as character-forming is nothing new. From Aristotle to church fathers to Charles Duhigg's *The Power of Habit*, a concern for harnessing our habits continues as a key part of the discussion of character. When we become consumed with checking our Twitter feed or Facebook posts, or when we engage in Fantasy Football or on-line gaming excessively, we are forming habits that hinder our care for others and for the world. Too much use of our screens and we find we've built the habit of distractedness into all we do. And, as Nicholas Carr argues, that very distractedness negatively affects our ability to be empathetic and compassionate (221).

The opportunity to be shaped by or to shape our technologies remains. In *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age,* media scholar Quentin Schultze challenges us to be people who demonstrate virtue in our technological practices. "Humility asks us to justify our technological decisions not on the basis of what they do for our egos, but on the basis of caring for others as responsible stewards of the gift of creation" (107). When we practice stewardship, care for the world and for others, we are also shaping the kind of people we are becoming for the better.

The Articles

In the first article, Gary Panetta explores the dangers and possibilities that connectivity poses. Using the lens of stewardship, he challenges us to use social media for "the common good." The *Charlie Hebdo* case highlights what Neil Postman considers a danger of the ascendency of technology: the trivialization of symbols. Although discussing the

commercialization of religious symbols, Postman's comment might very well express the concerns of Muslims in this example: "The constraints are so few that we may call this a form of cultural rape, sanctioned by an ideology that gives boundless supremacy to technological progress and is indifferent to the unraveling of tradition" (170). If users of social media fail to exercise restraint, fail to consider possible consequences of their on-line actions, not only is individual character damaged, but the broader social life is also affected. As we know, revolutions are now empowered by social media.

Moving from the large-scale focus on world issues to the leisure experience of Americans, Matthew Schlimm makes the case that social media also provide opportunities for positive relationships and leisurely fun—things that build community. He examines Fantasy Football's capacity to foster friendship while cautioning of its potential to indulge vice.

"What does it mean to be a responsible parent when it comes to using social media?" asks Jenn Supple Bartels. Questions of oversharing, consent, digital footprints, even engaging in one's own identity work through images of one's children challenge our desire to practice integrity, justice, and compassion. Yet she, too, arrives at that cautionary intersection of discerning use and reminds us that authenticity and stewardship must both be considered as key to excellent character online.

Communication scholar John Stewart concludes our journal with a summary and response which challenges us to remember how character is shaped by our use of social media. We can use it mindfully, purposefully, or we can yield to the technology's shaping power. When we choose to use our technologies wisely, we exercise a more virtuous character.

This Journal Project

In the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque, we ask questions about character and how it is shaped by or shapes current topics. Hence, this journal *Character and . . .* is an effort to provoke both the questions and reflections on the answers. This inaugural issue is a joint effort of College and Seminary that focuses on *Character and . . . Social Media*.

Bringing together students and faculty from different disciplines yielded rich conversations.[1] The process of developing these articles involved regular team meetings, common readings, and lots of discussion. At times, our moments of "ah ha" had us leaping out of our chairs. At other times, our circling around and around on particular issues had us in despair. Our hope is that you, our readers, will discover your own "ah ha's" and be challenged to continue the discussion. May you discover the joy of practicing wise use of technology, forming good habits, and being the kind of people whose character matters.

Annalee R. Ward, author of publications in ethics and communication, is currently Director of the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, IA. Through programming and curriculum, Ward works to ensure the Wendt Center fulfills its mission to "engage the university community in a cooperative and spirited effort to foster intellectual understanding of and personal commitment to leading lives of purpose and excellent moral character."

Notes

[1] We acknowledge the contributions of Seminarian Terri Jo Crego who participated in the discussions via Skype. Ultimately, unfavorable circumstances led to her dropping off the team late in the process.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Nichomachean Ethics.* Trans. Marin Ostwald. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1962. Print.

Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to our Brains.* New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011. Print.

Duhigg, Charles. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and in Business.* New York: Random House, 2012. Print.

Eggers, Dave. *The Circle.* San Francisco: Alfred A. Knopf, McSweeney's Books, 2013. Print.

Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World.* 1932. New York: HarperCollins, 1989. Print.

Monsma, Stephen V., Clifford Christians, Eugene R. Dykema, Arie Leegwater, Egbert Schuurman, Lambert Van Poolen. *Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective.* Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship. Ed. Stephen V. Monsma. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986. Print.

"Facebook Post Sparks Deadly Violence Against Ahmadis in Pakistan." *NBC News*. NBCNews.com, 28 Jul. 2014. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.

Orwell, George. *1984*. 1949. Because that's the original publication New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 1987. Print.

Postman, Neil. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992. Print.

Ross, Catherine. "Social Media Discipline: Mom Sells Daughter's Katy Perry Tickets Online." *WDAY News*. Forum Communications Company, 29 Jul. 2014. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.

Ruffin, Jessica. "Fantasy Football Leads to Friendship for Earnhardt, Ives." *Hendrick Motor Sports*. HendrickMotorsports.com, 31 Jul. 2014. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.

Schultze, Quentin J. *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002. Print.

Vallor, Shannon. "New Social Media and the Virtues." *The Good Life in a Technological Age*. Eds. Philip Brey, Adam Briggle, and Edward Spence. New York: Routledge, 2012. 193-202. Print.