Social Media Exposed!

By Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA — December 16, 2019

The ubiquitous online portals are always in the news. A new study looks at how we use – and are used by – these virtual conversations that first started taking place around the campfire before moving to the water cooler.

As the holiday season ends, as it inevitably will, it will become the season of self-congratulatory award ceremonies. One organization, International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences and Industry Relations produces the Webbys – awards for web content. In conjunction with YouGov, an internet market research firm, they surveyed 4000 US adults on their use of the Internet and social media. I’ll leave the results to the report; I will provide a bit of commentary.
No surprise here, people open social media to be social, a combination of keeping up with friends and the Joneses, as well as dishing the dirt, gossip, a much-maligned but essential means of communicating reputation in all social settings. Participants were about evenly split on whether their social media feeds were satisfying to them. A more in-depth look showed that only a small percentage of people were looking for something new (roughly 9% for ideas, 5% for art or music) and an even smaller percentage were looking for a fight – 3%.

One frequently voiced concern is that social media is about tribalism, that people gravitate towards their similars – with the Internet breeding many homogenous groups. But this is not what social media necessarily
serves up.

If homogenous tribes are really the case, then about half rarely notice what they may be missing, a third of respondents did report seeing material that they found controversial. Almost half were exposed to brands or people (influencers?) they don’t follow. Attention is both physiologic, e.g., responding to movement like video or GIFs, and unconscious self-selection. Social media facilitates seeing what we want to see, even if it subconscious. I would suggest that we still shape our own opinions, but that social media accelerates the process resulting in premature closure on one belief over another.

![Bar chart](chart.png)

No surprise here either. Politics encompasses all of our concerns, especially policy discussions, which can act as a proxy for fighting about culture. But most of us evidently like to argue, slightly less than 1 in 5 don’t argue at all. But we tend to pick our arguments. 60% simply watch the arguments play out and don’t participate – bystanders. But arguing comes at a cost.
Discussion in the virtual world have repercussions in the real world. Taking the number of people that argue and the number of relationships that are subsequently broken, we seem to have a lot of social skirmishes, lots of coming and going among individuals who represent the loose connections within our networks.
In the war for attention, controversy draws eyes, and being the social animals we are, we can't help ourselves but engage. I will leave the last word to noted sociologist Reginald Kenneth Dwight, you may know him as Elton John.

“Don't give us none of your aggravation
We had it with your discipline
Saturday night's alright for fighting
Get a little action in.”

It is always Saturday night on the Internet.
