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"The Social Media Revolution:

A cautionary look at how new social media technologies are changing the way people connect and even think."

My interest in social media is twofold. The first is that I work in the technology field. I'm the Director of Business Development for a premier New Hampshire IT firm called Mainstay Technologies. As a result, I'm continually involved in discussions about how new technologies, including social media, can be leveraged to help businesses, nonprofits, and government entities obtain greater effectiveness and efficiency. In this respect, you might expect me to be an enthusiastic cheerleader for social media in every circumstance.

However, when I'm not working hard helping companies leverage the newest technologies when they are appropriate for their organizations, I work part time as an upper school teacher at Laconia Christian School where I attempt to push students to think through the implications of these new technologies on life and culture. I am not a teacher of technology, mind you, but a teacher of those old fashioned, somewhat outdated pieces of technology that some of you may know of as *books*.

As a result, my comments this morning will not be a step by step lesson on how to use social media; neither will it be a cheerleading session for it, nor a complete declamation of it either. Rather, I would like to explore what I consider to be a more foundational topic, namely: *how this new medium of social media is shaping how our societies function and how individuals who use them behave and think*. Lastly I will offer a couple suggestions for how those of you who set the vision and policy for our state's libraries might consider going about the tricky business of handling social media in your institutions.

What is social media?

Before I begin my remarks, for the sake of clarity, let me define from the outset what I mean when I use the term "social media": Social media is any online or "virtual" media outlets that facilitate social interaction, be they friendships, romantic relationships, or even business relations. Therefore, social media can and does take many different forms, such as social networking sites, online dating sites, blogs, instant messaging tools, email, podcasts, and even video sharing sites. The most widely used examples of these kinds of sites would be:

Facebook and *MySpace*

These are online "communities" where users collect "friends," send messages to one another, provide profile information about themselves, inform one another of what products, celebrities, movies, etc.

they like. Users may also post one line "status updates" where they inform other users what they may be doing or thinking during any given moment.

Twitter

This social media service, which is rapidly gaining popularity, is what's known as a "microblog." Instead of writing full length blog posts, users post one to two sentence messages, which could either be "status" updates, advertisements, or links to other websites.

E-Harmony and Match.com

These are online dating networks – sort of a virtual Saturday evening lounges – where users are encouraged to search for romantic relationships via their common interests and beliefs that are determined by the introductory survey the user completes upon joining.

YouTube

This is a video sharing site where users can, instead of sending messages, post videos for others to see. They could share anything from their favorite TV show episodes to music videos they like to videos of themselves doing any number of activities, from the substantial to the inane to the immoral. As one has put it, "What happens in Vegas, stays on YouTube…"

Again, social media takes many forms – these are just a few of hundreds – but the key to remember is that social media is a means to communicate and socialize in a "virtual" environment without the constraints of geographical proximity, social classes, or many of the other confines of the physical world or traditional mores.

You say you want a revolution…

The title of this presentation is "The Social Media Revolution," and, for a couple different reasons, I don't think it would be inappropriate to call the influx of social media technology into our culture a "revolution."

Social media is revolutionary, for one, in its *scope* – that is, in its domination of our time and attention. Consider the following up-to-date statistics, some of which come from the Pew Internet and American Life Project:

- 73% of teenagers who go online use social networking sites.
- An almost equal number, 72%, of young adults use these sites, as well.
- And if you thought it was only the very young who were entrenched in social media, you'll be interested to note that 40% of all adults over 30 years old use these sites.

In the summer edition of the technology journal *The New Atlantis*, writer Christine Rosen joked, "I can't count how many times I have mentioned social networking websites to someone over the age of forty and received the reply, "Oh yes, I've heard about that MyFace! All the kids are doing that these days. Very interesting!"" However, this kind of adult *dis*connection from social media is rapidly decreasing.

Social media is now so popular with both the young and the old that interaction with social media websites has overtaken the viewing of pornography as the number one activity on the web.

- If the number of Facebook users were the population of a country, it would be the 3rd most populated nation in the world, just under India and China. Facebook, which has 400 million users, has almost 100 million more users than the entire United States has citizens.
- About one in five Americans post their streams of consciousness using microblog services such as Twitter.

Also note that with the widespread dissemination of the iPhone, the Blackberry, and other Smartphones, all of these social media outlets can be accessed without regard for one's geographic location, time of day or night, social setting, etc. Social media can be accessed during the teacher's lesson, at the dinner table, during the pastor's sermon, while on vacation, in the middle of reading a book, while hiking up a mountain, at two in the morning, and perhaps even during the middle of this presentation.

This influx of social media technology is also revolutionary, though, in the older, French sense of the word: that is, social media truly is an *overthrow* of the previous social order. You've often heard the expression, "To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail." The underlying assumption here is that the tools people use change the way they behave and even understand and view the world. Well the same can and should be said of social media. It is not simply a *tool* for communication or a *method* for establishing and maintaining human relationships, but rather *shapes the way we understand* what relationships are and how communication should be. Or to put it another way, social media is not simply something we *do*, but rather profoundly shapes who we *are*.

A Tale of Two Families: How our tools shape us

In order to make this point clear, let us ponder for a minute an example of another tool of ours that has shaped our worldview – this tool is not as old as the hammer, but certainly much older than social media – consider the clock. The clock is a piece of technology that, without our awareness, has subtlety, but dramatically, changed our worldview. Lewis Mumford, in his book *Technics and Civilization*, speaks of how the clock, which was developed in the fourteenth century, is "a piece of power machinery whose 'product' is seconds and minutes." He argues that the clock was not simply a tool to keep track of time, but actually cemented in our collective minds the idea of "moment to moment." When the clock was first introduced into the homes of common people, most human beings still ordered their lives, not according to *moments*, that is minutes and hours, but according to the rhythms of nature – with the rising and setting of the sun, at the micro level, and the with the four seasons, at the macro level.

You might ask, though, "How does one's worldview change dramatically simply by having their lives ordered by clock instead of some other means, such as the sun and the seasons?" To illustrate the point, I want you to imagine two separate family Thanksgiving dinner parties: In the first instance, members of, let's call them the Clock family, are told that Thanksgiving dinner will begin promptly at 2pm. In the second instance, members of, let's call them the Sun family, are simply told to show up when the sun is high in the sky and dinner will be served then.

Now clearly in the first instance, the factors which determine when the Clock family will start dinner are quite limited. There is only one factor, in fact, which is that dinner will simply begin when the clock strikes 2 – when that *moment* arrives.

However, in the second instance, consider the *many* factors that the Sun family must take into account in order to determine when the meal should begin. They will only call people together to the table, for instance, when the roast is actually ready, which may or may not be at 2pm. Also, the meal probably won't begin until everyone (at least everyone they want there) has shown up. Furthermore, the meal may not begin until the exciting Wiffle Ball game in the yard is over or, perhaps, until the kids have woken up from their naps, etc.

As you can see, the Sun family's lack of a clock-determined dinner time means that they are forced to evaluate whether or not the time is right to eat based on *multiple important factors*. For the Clock family, however, the presence of the clock encourages them to ignore these other factors in deference to a pre-set moment, irrespective of the particulars of the situation. Without the clock, people are forced to evaluate whether or not a particular moment in time is the *right* time to do something, rather than simply by looking at the clock and seeing if it says 2pm. If you doubt this claim, how often have you eaten lunch at 12pm or thereabouts, not because you were actually hungry then, but because that was simply when your lunch was *scheduled*?

To consider another example of how the clock's "time stamping" mentality has taken hold of our mindsets and cultural patterns, think of how workers are now paid "by the hour," rather than by the unique factors of their particular job. In fact, the idea of the "40 hour work week" is really an invention of a clock-based industrial culture. Perhaps the nature of one's work *should* demand a 50 hour work week. Or possibly a 20 hour work week at one time of the year and a 50 hour work week at another time.

The story of the clock in modern society is the story of how we have been freed from the demands of keen attention to multiple particulars, as well as being released from the rhythms of nature, only to find ourselves held hostage by and in obedience to our calendars and day minders. Again, the clock did not simply give us another *tool* for keeping track of time, but actually gave us a new way of *thinking about* time and *ordering* our lives. This does not imply that we should all get rid of our clocks – our bosses would certainly not be pleased – but it does illustrate the shaping power that our tools have over us, even the ones we take for granted and rarely think of.

So, if Mumford is right that our tools are not just things we fashion, but things that fashion us, as well, then how is the widespread use of social media changing us? How is it affecting our culture, our youth, and we as individuals? How is it both revolutionary in its popularity and scope, but also in its overthrow of our previous social order?

The number of ways these technologies are revolutionizing our external behavior and internal worldviews are, no doubt, legion, but let us consider just two in our remaining time:

First, let's look at the way that social media dramatically increases the amount of time we spend engaging in and thinking about our social lives, and how it, consequently, distracts us from less immediate, but nonetheless incredibly substantial and important concerns.

Second, let's consider the way that social media reshapes the way we go about establishing and maintaining human relationships, and how those new ways redefine what we think human relationships are and what they should consist of.

Our focus in focus

In order to consider how social media increases the amount of time we spend engaging in socialization, let's stroll down memory lane for a minute and consider a typical day in most of our lives when we were children. For most of us, we would get up in the morning and get ready for school. We would then go to school and sit in classes, where teachers would sometimes attempt to focus our attention on things of importance and weight – perhaps scientific discoveries, or important historical events, or maybe even philosophical or theological discussions. School wasn't all weighty, though, of course – often we would play on the playground or play sports with our friends during breaks and possibly even hang out with friends after school. Then when 4 or 5 o'clock rolled around, we would walk or drive home, and when we walked through the front door of our home, our peer-to-peer social lives were effectively over. We would eat dinner, perhaps listen to our parents talk about their days at work or what was happening in the world, probably watch TV, do our home work, and sometimes spend time in our rooms. We had telephones, of course, but most kids didn't spend large amounts of time talking to their friends after school. It didn't make sense to since we just saw them and spent all day with them at school.

For the most part, when you came home, your time and attention stopped being focused on your friends and on your social life. This is no longer the case. Now when a child comes home from school, they are almost equally capable of "connecting" with their friends as they were at school. Most parents give their children all of the social networking tools they need – namely a cell phone with text messaging capability and a computer with internet access – to spend each waking moment having virtual connections with their peers and focusing on the major and minor details of their social lives. It could not be easier now for a teenager (or younger) to flip open a laptop at midnight and chat with a buddy down the street or a "friend" who they may have never even met. Or, while their parents are chatting during dinner, they could be tapping out a text message to one of their peers. And even when they are logged off – even when their computer is shut down and their cell phone battery has died – they have the continual sense that some socially significant event could be happening: Perhaps their girlfriend or boyfriend has broken up with them and changed their Facebook status from "In a relationship" to "Single;" perhaps someone has uploaded a picture of them they took during school; or maybe there has been Twitter messages their friends are writing that they are missing. In other words, through the time consumption and mental anxiety that comes with constant social activity, social media encourages teens to spend inordinate amounts of time and attention focusing on that which is socially *immediate*.

This tendency to be overly focused on and concerned with the details of one's social life is certainly not a new phenomenon for children and teenagers. However, as Mark Bauerline, writer of the

provocatively titled *The Dumbest Generation*, and someone who has thought deeply about the effects of the digital age on American youth, has said:

> "What does the example of Abraham Lincoln mean to them? It's the example of the star of the football team that is immediately relevant. What does what happened on Omaha Beach sixty years ago mean to them? It's what happened in the lunch room last week that is immediately relevant."

Bauerline admits, though, that the tendency to focus on that which is socially immediate is nothing new to teenagers. However, Bauerline argues that, "these are old inclinations and dispositions of adolescents *empowered like never before*."

And while this tendency to overly focus on one's own immediate social world is a long standing temptation for adolescents, it is not beyond the realm of temptation for adults, as well. Adults are increasingly spending comparative amounts of time as teenagers contemplating, navigating, and polishing their social networks, and catching up each evening on the status messages of their friends, acquaintances, or even perfect strangers, many of whom, they would otherwise not even be interested in seeing in person.

As I argued earlier, the ways in which technologies encourage us to act often have a profound impact on how we think. In this example, as social media encourages us to spend our time focusing on this realm of immediate interest, we are *dis*couraged from paying a great deal of attention to and, therefore, placing an appropriate importance upon, sustained attention to the deeper and more profound aspects of culture, art, and wisdom. As the quantity of time individuals spend on social media continues to rise, it will be increasingly difficult for these youth and adults, who are being trained to focus almost exclusively on that which is immediate to then delve into that which is higher and deeper.

One has to wonder whether individuals trained in this direction will ever be interested in, or even capable of, diving into an exploration of the most profound things – the intricate investigation of the human condition in one Shakespeare's plays, or the beauty and theological depth of a Michaelangelo fresco, or the sublime elegance of a Bach cello suite, or the political ponderings of Plato, just to name a few. Or what is perhaps more disheartening, one has to wonder whether people who are raised and trained to spend all of their time and attention on the immediate will even recognize or sense the goodness, wholeness, and joy of doing of those kinds of political, religious, and artistic engagement.

Taking each other out of context

Let us also consider the way that social media reshapes the way we go about establishing and maintaining human relationships, and how those new ways redefine what we think human relationships are and what they should consist of.

If social media and other communication technologies are praised for anything, they are praised for making the world a "smaller place" – a "global village," as it were – and enhancing our ability to connect with one another regardless of our geographic location. Communication technologies, such as social

media, allow Ohio to talk to New Hampshire and even for New Hampshire to talk to Afghanistan. There has always been a sense of nobility in this hope, for who could blame a mother living in Ohio for wanting a way to connect with her son living in New Hampshire? Or who could blame a wife in New Hampshire for wanting a way to connect with her husband fighting in a war across the seas? However, similarly to the way in which our removal of the limitations of the sun and the seasons have enslaved us to the demands of the clock and the calendar, our removal of the limitations of geographical proximity have enslaved us again – this time, I believe, to the shallowness and emptiness of virtual relationships and online communities.

To illustrate my point, I offer up a personal example. Several years ago, my mother and step father decided that, after about 25 years living in New England, they were going to move to Ohio. My mother was interested in living near some of our relatives who lived there, and my step father, although already employed, had a job opportunity there, as well. I was recently married at the time and both my wife and I were deeply saddened by this decision. I urged my Mom to reconsider, and told her that I feared that she and I would lose much of the relational closeness we had or would, if nothing else, lack the shared space and time required to cultivate it further. Furthermore, I tried to help her see that this move would have a profound impact on her ability to be close, both in the geographical and relational senses of the word, not only to me and my wife, but also to her grandchildren, who would surely not be far from coming. Her response to these concerns echoed, I think, many of our shared cultural assumptions. She granted that our relationship would "not be the same," of course, but insisted that we could still "stay close" through the use of the phone, email, and other technological mediums.

The problem, however, with these forms of technology which promise relational closeness and human connection – social media being the ultimate example – are *not* that they do not provide any relational connection – these mediums certainly *do* provide connection, and they provide it in spades. The problem is that these technologies, and other forms of social media, provide this connection *outside of the contexts which make for holistic, substantive, and psychologically satisfying individual relationships*.

For example, social media primarily encourages one kind of decontextualized human interaction, namely *the exchange of information*. Users are encouraged to keep their "friends" up to date on their personal status, moods, likes, dislikes, activities, etc. – again, there's lots of connection going on here, and a lot of information changing hands. However, holistically satisfying human connectivity may *include* the exchange of information, but it cannot do so at the expense of other essential human contexts.

Think, for instance, on the profound beauty of putting a silent hand on a loved one's shoulder during their grief. Could this take place over video conferencing? Does this grieving loved one need you to transfer information to her about your sympathy? Or consider the special bond a father and son create while simply sharing smiles during a game of catch in the yard. Could this be replicated with a dad's post on his son's Facebook "Wall?" What about the way in which a woman comes to know a man through watching him interact with his mother? Could this important piece of information be truly passed along to a potential mate in an online chat room?

No, none of these things can happen holistically and in their appropriate contexts "virtually"; none of them can happen without flesh and blood; none of them can happen from Ohio to New Hampshire. All

of these beautiful and whole ways of connecting to one another take into account other aspects of what it means to be human. Put succinctly, social media, through its promises of human connection unencumbered by geographical proximity, diminishes people's ability to establish and maintain *fully human* familial bonds, friendships, and romances.

How to take the road less traveled

So where do we go from here? If the tools we fashion proceed to fashion us, and if social media is a tool that often fashions us in profoundly negative ways – and yet is so wildly popular and appears to be here to stay – what are we all to do, especially those of you who set the vision and policies for local libraries, institutions which are meant to serve these very people?

I am not a librarian or a library trustee, but I imagine that there will be (if there is not already) much pressure put on libraries to either provide expanded social media access to library patrons, or even for libraries themselves to utilize social media to market themselves or, perhaps, just to "stay relevant." Now I will not presume to tell whether or not you should use social media or not – as I implied earlier, I believe these decisions must be made only after closely examining many important factors, namely the kinds of people your libraries serve, the kinds of communities your libraries are in, your overarching goals. However, let me offer up an example I think library trustees and policy setters would be wise to follow, regardless of whether or not they ultimately incorporate these new technologies within their institutions or encourage their use amongst their patrons.

Consider the way in which some religious groups, such as the Mennonites, approach the advent of new technological devices. Contrary to popular opinion, most Mennonites are not "anti-technology." Rather, they simply *hesitate* to accept new technologies into their communities until it can be determined whether or not these new technologies will encourage or discourage the kind of living and thinking they see as whole and healthy.

So, for example, when in the early twentieth century it became possible for a telephone to be installed in any individual's private home, the Mennonites took a cautious approach. Rather than immediately installing these new communication devices as the wave of the future, they waited to see how their induction into society would affect the lives of individuals and the health of local communities around them. In other words, they paused long enough to be able to critically examine the way the telephone would affect the shape of their communities.

What they discovered is that the telephone had positive and negative consequences. Negatively, they saw how telephones often encouraged a breakdown of local communities via an increased focus on life outside of the community and home. However, they also recognized the positive practical use of telephones in obtaining quick medical help and other time sensitive assistance. As a result of this examination, many Mennonite communities accepted the use of telephones in a *modified and limited sense*. They attempted to implement these devices into their communities in ways that would simultaneously discourage their negative effects and encourage their positive ones.

For example, many Mennonite communities agreed to keep telephones out of private homes, but rather to install a limited number of "phone booths" within the grounds of the community. As a result, the phones would be close enough to access when needed, but far enough away to keep from becoming too convenient to use. This arrangement allowed individuals to utilize the telephone for some of its practical and time sensitive benefits, but did not allow it to invade the home, breaking down family and community life.

I would challenge you to follow this example as you seek to wisely implement or abstain from implementing social media into your own life and the organizational life of your library. Seek to wrestle with the philosophical and practical implications of accepting these new technologies, and use your imagination to anticipate how these technologies might affect you, your family, and your library. Wait to see how these technologies are affecting individuals and the culture, at large, and whatever you do, do so *slowly* and cautiously.

Furthermore, do not assume that your usage of these technologies must be an "all or nothing" affair. Like the Mennonite usage of the telephone, perhaps there may be ways to incorporate social media that takes advantage of its uses without falling prey to its dangers.

Lastly, I will suggest that whatever policies you set in your libraries regarding social media, or any media for that matter, set them without making your primary goal to be an appeal to the latest cultural trends, or simply as an attempt to "stay relevant." Rather, set policies that call your patrons to the most healthy and whole ways of living, regardless of whether healthy and whole living is particular popular at the moment. Libraries have always been, and I hope will continue to be, one of the few institutions in our society that have the specific mission to call citizens to higher and deeper levels of thinking and more virtuous ways of living. Libraries provide the opportunity to increase literacy and to foster a deeper and more profound intellectual, artistic, and cultural engagement in our citizenry. If libraries are going to stay *truly* relevant in our culture – that is necessary to it – they must continue to call citizens to the highest and best ways of life, not simply the latest ones.

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