

Forget Your Phone on Purpose: How to Avoid the Perils of Digital Life



by Barb Howe

There's an old movie from the 1940s starring Jimmy Stewart and Margaret Sullivan called "The Shop Around the Corner." Set around the turn of the last century, the plot revolves around two co-workers who can't stand each other and endlessly compete to impress the boss. But secretly, in their private lives, they are both pining for romantic love. One day one of them sees and responds to a well-written personal ad in the newspaper. You can probably guess who turns out to be the author.

Such a movie could not be made in the present day. Why? Because we no longer have separate private/public lives in the digital age. In the age of social media, is it even possible to have a hobby or interest that your co-workers or boss don't know about?

Like the co-workers in the movie, we yearn for connection and for a right to be someone different outside of the workplace. That's healthy. But where Jimmy Stewart and Margaret Sullivan could eventually discover (and fall in love with) the less-public side of each other, we in the digital age are increasingly finding that there *is* no less-public side. We build our public/professional personas online, not just on resume sites like LinkedIn, but ev-

erywhere. Most employers will now check the social media accounts of a prospective new hire, including Facebook and Instagram.

The disappearance of the private sphere is not the only way in which the digital age has impacted our mental well-being. Study after study has shown that the more time people spend on social media, the more depressed and lonely they feel. It's hard to remember when you're scrolling on Facebook that you're looking at a very skewed picture. People don't share the less flattering parts of themselves online. Naturally, we all want to look like we lead glamorous picture-perfect lives. But this has a serious negative effect. How many of us remember when we're looking at our friends' posts on social media that we're seeing carefully curated selections of their lives and not the whole picture? Social media cultivates our insecurities making us feel like perpetual high-schoolers. Seeing pictures of our friends at parties we weren't invited to feels awful. We've even coined a new phrase for it: FOMO—the Fear Of Missing Out.

Is it any wonder rates of depression and suicide are increasing especially in young people? According to the Centers for Disease Control, suicide rates have increased

nearly 30 per cent since 1999. Coincidentally, Google was founded in 1998.

It gets worse. Social media is not just destroying our personal lives, it's doing real damage to society as a whole. The business model of the social media industry is one based not on users' subscriptions (you don't have to pay to sign up to use Facebook) but on revenue from those who pay to have their content promoted. Anyone can pay to have their content promoted on Facebook, non-profits or neo-Nazis; Facebook doesn't care. In 2016, a foreign government organized a social media campaign to convince Americans who to vote for in the U.S. election. That certainly caused a lot of outcry, but two years later we're all still on social media.

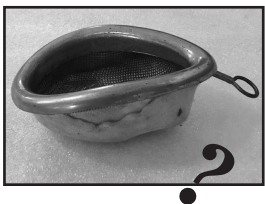
Secondly, there is an inherent incentive to promote inflammatory outrageous content on social media because that's what keeps people clicking. "User engagement" is one of the most important metrics tech companies track because that's what makes them money. Did you pause while scrolling? Did you click on that outrageous (and probably fake) news story? Did you share that meme? Sharing is most valuable of all because people tend to trust information that comes from other people they know. It lends credibility to the story.

It will always be "free to sign up" Facebook assures us on its login page. There's a reason for that and it's not because they want to provide this service to you for the good of humanity. Facebook is a business, and like any business its purpose is to make money. Facebook has over two billion users, all of whom signed up for free because in this business model, you're not the buyer, you're the product being sold. What tech companies are actually selling is access to you, your eyeballs, your attention. And they're selling it to anyone who wants to buy.

Is that a price you are willing to pay so that you can look at pictures of your grandkids on a website rather than have them sit on your lap? Someday someone will build a better online social networking platform. Until then, close your laptop and forget your phone. It may be the best thing you ever do, not only for your own health but for the health of your whole community.

Barb Howe works in Digital Communications in Washington DC and Gainesville. She has an MA in Political Science from the University of Florida.

Shades of the Past: WHAT IS IT?

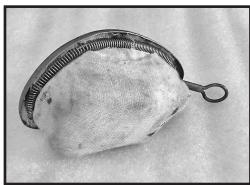


Do you recognize the item (3 views) pictured at left? What IS it?

If you know what it is, share your knowledge with our readers. Send a letter to *The Chronicle*, P. O. Box 250, Hawthorne, FL 32640. Or email us at: thechronicle.fl@gmail.com. And stop by the museum and see this issue's item for yourself at 7225 SE 221 Street (about 2 blocks south of City Hall, across the RR tracks). Open Saturdays from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. When you visit the museum, you will receive your free "Celebrating the Past" wristband.



The Answer for May-June 19 issue: an electrical insulator. Commonly made of glass or porcelain in many shapes and colors, insulators were originally designed to keep the wires linking telegraphs and telephones insulated from the wooden poles that held them aloft. With the expansion of rural electrification in the early 20th century, there was a major boom in the manufacturing of insulators, with production peaking from the 1920s through the 1940s. They were put to use for the first time in 1844, when inventor Samuel F. B. Morse connected Baltimore with Washington, D. C. via a telegraph line that ran parallel to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad tracks. Still highly collectible, there are over 3,000 insulator collectors today via insulator clubs and local and national shows.



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