

EDITORIAL

Mobile Phones & Social Media – Assets for Ministry?

I recently sat down next to a student in chapel here at Houghton College who was playing a game on his tablet while a fellow student led the gathered assembly in prayer. As the speaker got up to begin his message, this student continued with his game without bothering to look up. Given that I eagerly wanted to listen to the chapel speaker, and was distracted by the shining screen right next to me, I quietly asked the student to pay attention. He *reluctantly* turned off his device and appeared to be asleep by the time one of the most consistently prophetic speakers in our community was getting to the main point of his outstanding Reformation Day message.

I must admit that, living in a college community where mobile devices and social media are having *profoundly negative* impact on people's ability to concentrate, think, learn and socialize face-to-face, I find it hard to shift gears and focus on ways to use these very mediums to advance the cause of Christ. Since I bought my first smartphone a couple of years ago, I am finding it harder and harder to resist its enticement to waste a lot of time. A decade ago when Facebook, and more recently Twitter, became popular and *assaulted* my college-aged kids' lives, I chose not to participate. After ten years I still don't feel that I have lost out by *not being a part of* this virtual social world.

Indeed, even some who helped create Facebook are seeing the damage these social media platforms are causing and are leaving the world of social media and sounding the alarm. Justin Rosenstein, creator of the 'Like' button on Facebook, and co-creator of Gchat during a stint at Google, notes research shows that people touch, swipe or tap their smartphone *2,617 times a day* (more than 145 times every waking hour)! He highlights the growing concern that technology is contributing toward so-called 'continuous partial attention', severely limiting people's ability to focus. One recent study showed that the *mere presence* of smartphones damages cognitive capacity – even when the device is turned off. "‘Everyone is distracted’, Rosenstein says. ‘All of the time’".¹

This issue of SEEDBED explores ways that Christian ministries can connect with the least-reached peoples of the world through the use of social media and mobile phones (especially smartphones). Sadly, I remain somewhat sceptical of the potential of using such technology as a conduit for the gospel message. One sentence from an article in this issue stood out to me. Describing Bedouin youth living in a small rural town in the Middle East, Keith Williams notes that: 'Youth in our dusty town now spend their days much like youth anywhere else – messaging,

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia>

playing games, listening to tunes and watching videos on their phones'. If the minds and souls of even Bedouin youth are being sucked into this world of entertainment, distraction and trivialization, won't viewing short Jesus film video-clips on their phones simply become one more piece of trivializing entertainment?

Yet the authors of the articles in this SEEDBED have chosen to look beyond the negative effects of social media and our growing 'virtual' connectivity in order to help us develop the 'enormous potential' of using these tools to engage people in conversations about Jesus and the gospel. Preston argues that this kind of media can even be harnessed to help launch movements to Christ among Muslims in the least-reached regions of the world.

A former colleague recently did her doctoral research on the effectiveness of online discipleship. She found that only when she was able to develop genuine personal relationships with people (at a distance), relationships that took a lot of time and effort (using such tools as Skype), was there any discernible transformation taking place. She admits that it is far, far better for new believers to have someone who can disciple them in person rather than someone who is only accessible through a glowing screen. However, for those who have no access to other believers, online discipleship may be their only option.

The gospel is a profoundly incarnational message about a God who chose to take on flesh and dwell among us. Profound transformation generally comes about as people live in joyful submission to Christ in genuine community with other believers. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica, he reminded them about the way he was with them:

But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.... You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God (1 Thess 2:7 & 8, 10-12 ESV).

How can we bring this reality of the strength and sacrifice involved in being Jesus to those around us into our social media and smartphone ministry initiatives? As we read the stimulating and perceptive articles in this SEEDBED, it is my prayer and desire for all of us, that we will hear God's voice and be led forward as we seek to take hold of the 'new' tools that are available for us. May we learn how to transform them into channels of the Spirit of God so that many, many more may encounter Christ and experience personal and community transformation.

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