Social Media: Frankenstein's Monster

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HOW many of us have got on a bus, or train, looked around and everyone is on their mobile phone or iPad? In a restaurant a couple come in to enjoy a meal and their own company and before you know it, they are on their phones. Apparently, most people check their media while on the loo.

Social media has become an addiction, a drug, which has sent the whole world mad, and the impact is far reaching in many different ways, some good but others very worrying and dangerous. We are all aware of the mental effect on children and teens regarding body image and depression brought on by bullying on Facebook and WhatsApp. Mental health problems have more than doubled since 2012, but what I am attempting to address is that social media could drive us to oblivion.

We seem to be currently in the disinformation age. I received an email from three different sources claiming that illegal immigrants were receiving £32000 per year from the government. This included hardship money, money for accommodation, food, relatives living abroad and so on. All very convincing if you don't factcheck. This was believed and then sent on to others who in the main would also concur with the contents, resulting in resentment towards immigrants. What won the Brexit referendum was the posters claiming 40 million Turks were about to enter Britain and £350 million per week was sent to the EU from the British exchequer. Both false. I only have to mention Donald Trump's 'Stop the Steal' and up to 70 million Americans accept this without evidence. It's not beyond the possibility that delusion could lead to civil war or at the very least civil unrest.

Conspiracy theories like QAnon are rife. It is a wide ranging and completely unfounded theory that Donald Trump is waging a secret war against elite Satan-worshiping paedophiles in government and in the media. Absolutely preposterous but it has millions of followers.

What drives all this? Social media, and it's scary. Have we created a Frankenstein's monster? Think about it: 25 people sitting somewhere in Silicon Valley have influence over 2 billion people. When the bicycle or car was invented, we didn't say this could be the end of democracy. No tool is as effective as Facebook in controlling populations. It was used by the Myanmar military to whip up the Buddhist population against the Rohingya Muslims resulting in genocide and expulsion from their homeland. ISIS and White Supremacy groups use this tool very effectively.

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Social media can change how you think – it is controlling us, not us controlling them. They know everything we do and can predict our actions. If you were watching a porn site last night, they know, so beware. They can affect real world behaviour without triggering the users' awareness. They are completely clueless and their vulnerability is being exploited. Social media is designed to tell you what you want. They have accumulated all this data and there is little supervision of how they use it. Very few are going to factcheck the information they receive.

Nothing remotely like this has happened in the past. I think it was Arthur C. Clarke who said "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic".

Google, Facebook and WhatsApp are not free – in fact they are money-making machines, paid by advertisers and creating the richest people in the planet. Can we trust these multi-billionaires to make the right decisions for us? Absolutely not: they are mainly interested in making money. Can we trust governments to regulate them? No chance, look at Myanmar, not to mention Trump.

I was delighted when Twitter banned Trump, but that raises the issue of who decides what is allowed and what is not allowed. Do we let racists, white supremacists and Muslim fundamentalists peddle their lies and filth, relying on superior arguments and sound evidence? It's a difficult problem when you see what happened in Washington. It's another small step to ban people who just disagree with your opinion. I watched a television programme showing an American evangelical Church whose members stand on the freeway with posters saying 'God hates Fags'. Do you say 'get a life' or ban them for hate speech, which might result in gays getting beat up?

What do we do? How can we devise an ethical design of social media? Can we agree what is true and what is false? If not we have a problem. Regulation is obviously needed but it 'may be touch and go between utopia and oblivion'.

We can't put the genie back in the bottle, because this is a new kind of marketplace which is here to stay and is the richest in history, worth trillions of dollars. It can be a great force for good, getting information that was previously difficult or nigh impossible, helping sick people get donors and finding lost families. But social media clearly needs reforming ASAP before it destroys civilisation. ❑