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# Slaves of the social network revolution

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**DIGITAL VERTIGO:** How much have we given up to live our lives on the Internet?

**I**t was Justin Timberlake who kept me thinking hard about social networking. Yes, that Timberlake — songwriter, singer and actor.

It was the character Sean Parker that he played in the 2010 movie *The Social Network*, who pricked my conscience about how addicted I am to social media. The fictionalised version of the president of Facebook famously said: "We lived on farms, then we lived in cities, and now, we are going to live on the Internet."

How true!

The movie about the drama, intrigue and betrayal involving Facebook founders was anything but astonishing. The tagline for the movie is "You don't get to 500 million friends without making a few enemies".

Today, the number of Facebook users is a staggering 1.3 billion, or equivalent to the population of China. Every single day in June, there was an average of 829 million users in the world. There are 645 million registered Twitter users today and 500 million WhatsApp users worldwide. And many have all three accounts.

The Internet is now home. Social media is where we live now. We are not defining the way we communicate. The Internet and social media are redefining us. Online social revolution is changing the world and us. The dynamics of communication is undergoing massive transformation, so too how we live in today's world.

The "friends" we have in Facebook are virtual friends that we get to know virtually. Many are strangers to us, yet we embrace them as "friends".

Mark Zuckerberg made us think we are engaging "friends" in his creation. He defines what "friends" are for us. So, too, the word "likes" that has become part of communication lexicography. We define ourselves from the number of "friends" and "likes" in Facebook and "followers" in Twitter. But are we more informed? Are we more enlightened? Or are we a lot friendlier to start with? The debate will rage on.

Detractors are finding fault with social media. Ban them! some would argue. The supporters believe it is the

greatest creation by mankind after the invention of the wheel. Thanks to the Internet, we have access to almost everything now. The Wikipedia is fast making libraries irrelevant. Knowledge is now at the tip of one's finger, literally. We are inundated by facts and

figures by the billion — information that is in fact choking us. The Internet is the river of knowledge as well as trash.

We are fast becoming a society unsure what to do with the loads of information that descend upon us every second. We become the "forward generation", not in our forward thinking but for the penchant to "forward" everything we receive, even if we disagree with them. Trash begets trash. This is a world where nothing is sacred nor sacrosanct. Everything goes. It is a lawless world.

Are we really "sharing" which we should? Or is it true that despite our connectivity, we are becoming lonelier than ever? Is there such a thing as the politics of privacy or the fact that privacy has gone with the wind and no secret is secretive

enough to remain a secret, just as in the case of the WikiLeaks phenomenon. The age of privacy is over?

We need better understanding of the brave, yet frightening, new world that we are embarking on. The maturing of society took a long winding road back then.

Now, we are being painfully reminded of the overload of information to inform, educate and entertain us. We are simply forced to mature forcefully. Societies are in disarray, social norms are the thing of the past, even children are dizzyingly embracing everything online. What kind of society are we expecting in the future?

The social media revolution is here to stay. We are being coerced and seduced to embrace it. The argument is, we can't stop it. It is with us. The young are using it. We need to embrace social media to reach out to them. And one simply can't fight the digital tsunami.

Andrew Keen warned us in his daring 2012 book *Digital Vertigo* about the social media revolution. He argues that today's social media revolution "is the most wrenching cultural transformation" since the Industrial Revolution.

The transformation sadly, is weakening, disorientating, diminishing and dividing us than ever before. Instead of heralding the dawn of a new era, the revolution is in fact suffocating humankind. We have lost the ability to stand apart from the crowd, to be our own self, to act as individuals, not as a herd.

There are times when I wish I could prove Sean Parker wrong. But alas, like everyone else, I am shackled by the yoke of social networking.

We are merely slaves of technology.

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