Why social media might just be antisocial?

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I am not using the term antisocial in the typical psychiatric sense here, but rather to reflect how excessive use of social media is anything but socially affirming. More specifically perhaps a better term might be counter-social. Social media is time consuming, reduces social empathy, and perhaps more importantly, appears to be addictive. There is considerable medical and neurobiological evidence to suggest that the Internet and specific digital content is used addictively by increasing numbers with concomitant feelings of social disconnection, stress, anxiety and depressive feelings. Although this impacts all ages and demographics, the most susceptible groups are children, adolescents and young adults due to developmental issues, sensitized reward pathways, along with an immature prefrontal cortex, which is involved in reasoning and executive functioning—this combination becomes a perfect storm for addictive use.

Social media is high on the list of abused Internet content areas. It has ever-changing, dynamic, and intermittent reward contingencies (resulting in elevations of Dopamine) all with extreme ease of access. Here we view desirable/stimulating content, collect *likes and* comments, look at stimulating side content, and consume a plethora of targeted ads. Social media content is engineered to be presented in ways that enhance the users "*ease of access*" and produce "*threshold reduction to act*", hence, increasing its addictive appeal—in essence this may be viewed as a form of *broadcast intoxication*.

The dominant complaint that most social media users have is that they feel compelled to post *everything* they do and the uncanny feeling that if they don't post it, what they did has less inherent value. This sounds tedious, rather than socially life-affirming. We have become observers in our own lives as digital slaves to our devices and instead of participating we are witnessing our own lives by recording and broadcasting everything, but often missing the real-time experience.

For companies that sell devices, service, or access, this all results in *more viewing*, along with *metric data* and *targeted products* to sell. Selling is not the problem, rather it's the insidious and damaging way it's done that has such a deleterious impact. There is a long history of corporate consumer denial in this country-- Companies that produce or distribute addictive substances or behaviors have historically initially avoided any responsibility for the negative impact and health effects on consumers from their products and services. We have seen this historically with alcohol, gambling, tobacco, food products, and now with video games, social media, Internet, and smartphone technology. Only after public pressure, more government regulation, and significant public education do companies seem to start to distribute appropriate warnings, produce educational materials, and contribute funding to research and treatment.

Today this pattern has history repeating itself with digital content and social media: Primarily, there is denial that there is a problem, followed by denial of any responsibility for that problem--thus little positive change occurs. Ideally tech companies should inform, educate, and provide technical resources to help people manage their technology use in a more balanced, healthy, and sustainable manner. This can be accomplished as simply as on screen warnings, readily accessible information on the addictive nature of these technologies, healthy use suggestions, treatment resources, simpler and more effective parental and self-controls to limit our use, and perhaps most importantly automated systems (which are already technically possible) to disable the data stream when the user is in the driver's seat.

All of these solutions must be simple, seamless, and fool-proof as the stakes are high due to increasing numbers of distracted driving deaths (often connected to smartphone use). The government has the same responsibility to protect the public now as it did with tobacco, alcohol and gambling. That is to require companies who profit from our use (and addiction) to take on a more socially proactive and responsible role in helping everyone manage their technology so it doesn't mange us.