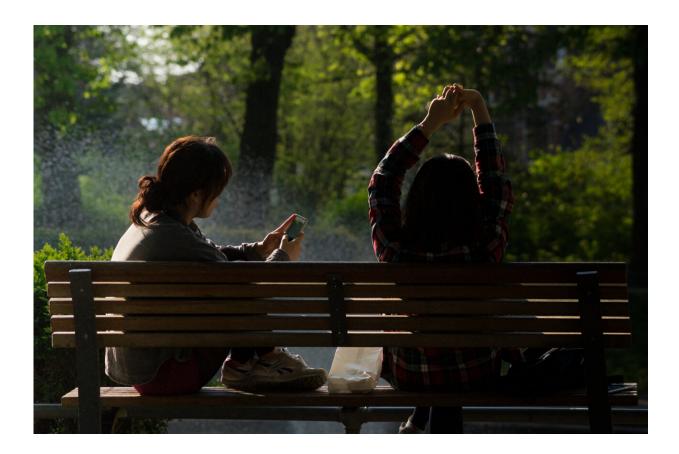# Social networking sites may be controlling your mind – here's how to take charge

December 5 2017, by Simon Mccarthy-Jones

Credit: Skitterphoto from Pexels

How can you live the life *you* want to, avoiding the distractions and manipulations of others? To do so, you need to know how you work. "Know thyself", the Ancients urged. Sadly, we are often bad at this.

But by contrast, others know us increasingly well. Our intelligence, sexual orientation – and much more – can be computed from our Facebook likes. Machines, using data from our digital footprint, are better judges of our personality than our friends and family. Soon, artificial intelligence, using our social network data, will know even more. The 21st-century challenge will be how to live when others know us better than we know ourselves.

But how free are we today? There are industries dedicated to capturing and selling our attention – and the best bait is social networking. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have drawn us closer round the campfire of our shared humanity. Yet, they come with costs, both personal and political. Users must decide if the benefits of these sites outweigh their costs.

This decision should be freely made. But can it be, if social networking sites are potentially addictive? The decision should also be informed. But can it be, if we don't know what is happening behind the curtain?

Sean Parker, the first president of Facebook, recently discussed the thought process that went into building this social network. He described it as being:

"All about how do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?"

To do this, the user had to be given:

"A little dopamine hit every once in a while because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post…and that's going to get you to contribute more."

Parker continued:

"It's exactly the kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with because you're exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology… The inventors, creators, it's me, it's Mark [Zuckerberg]… understood this consciously. And we did it anyway."

Human needs create human vulnerabilities

So what are these vulnerabilities? Humans have a fundamental need to belong and a fundamental desire for social status. As a result, our brains treat information about ourselves like a reward. When our behaviour is rewarded with things such as food or money, our brain's "valuation system" activates. Much of this system is also activated when we encounter self-relevant information. Such information is hence given great weight. That's why, if someone says your name, even across a noisy room, it automatically pops into your consciousness.

Information relating to our reputation and social rank is particularly important. We are wired to be sensitive to this. We understand social dominance at only 15 months of age.

Social networking sites grab us because they involve self-relevant information and bear on our social status and reputation. The greater your need to belong and be popular, and the stronger your brain's reward centres respond to your reputation being enhanced, the more irresistible is the site's siren song.

Is social media addictive?

Gambling is addictive because you don't know how many bets you will have to make before you win. B F Skinner uncovered this in his Harvard pigeon lab in the 1950s. If pigeons were given food every time they pecked a button, they pecked a lot. If they were only sometimes given

food when they pecked a button, they not only pecked much more, but did so in a frantic, compulsive manner.

It could be argued that Skinner's pigeon lab was resurrected at Harvard in 2004, with two modifications. It was called Facebook. And it didn't use pigeons.

When you check Facebook you can't predict if someone will have left you self-relevant information or not. Social network sites are slot machines that pay out the gold of self-relevant information. This is why billions of people pull their levers. So, can they be addictive?

Facebook reportedly originally advertised itself as "the college addiction". Today, some researchers claim Facebook addiction "has become a reality". However, this is not a recognised psychiatric disorder and there are problems with the concept.

People undertake many activities on Facebook, from gaming to social networking. The term "Facebook addiction" hence lacks specificity. Also, as Facebook is just one of many networking sites, the term "social networking addiction" would seem more appropriate.

Yet, the term "addiction" itself remains potentially problematic. Addictions are typically thought of as chronic conditions that cause problems in your life. Yet, a 5-year follow-up study found that many excessive behaviours deemed to be addictions – such as exercising, sex, shopping and video gaming – were fairly temporary. Furthermore, excessive social network use need not cause problems for everyone. Indeed, labelling excessive involvement in an activity as an "addiction" could result in the overpathologisation of everyday behaviors. Context is key.

Nevertheless, excessive social network use has been convincingly argued

to lead to symptoms associated with addiction. This includes becoming preoccupied with these sites, using them to modify your mood, needing to use them more and more to get the same effects, and suffering withdrawal effects when use is ceased that often cause you to start using again. The best estimate is that around 5% of adolescent users have significant levels of addiction-like symptoms.

Taking back control

How can we benefit from social networking sites without being consumed by them?Companies could redesign their sites to mitigate the risk of addiction. They could use opt-out default settings for features that encourage addiction and make it easier for people to self-regulate their usage. However, some claim that asking tech firms "to be less good at what they do feels like a ridiculous ask". So government regulation may be needed, perhaps similar to that used with the tobacco industry.

Users could also consider whether personal reasons are making them vulnerable to problematic use. Factors that predict excessive use include an increased tendency to experience negative emotions, being unable to cope well with everyday problems, a need for self-promotion, loneliness and fear of missing out. These factors will, of course, not apply to everyone.

Finally, users could empower themselves. It is already possible to limit time on these sites using apps such as Freedom, Moment and StayFocusd . The majority of Facebook users have voluntarily taken a break from Facebook, though this can be hard.

"I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul," run the famous lines from Invictus. Sadly, future generations may find them incomprehensible.

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