Take three: Social media

Friend or Foe - is social media good for society or a bad influence? A forum for sharing owned by its users or a haven for bullying and bad behaviour? Old Joe asked three academics to lend their voices to a very modern debate.

'Social media is good for society. When Twitter launched, people said: "What can you say in 140 characters?" but look at it now – it raises awareness of humanitarian causes and generates mass support. 'Social media connects people to what's happening around the world, but more than that, it connects them with people who they may not access in any other way. And that connection can humanise those people. For example, someone in the UK can connect with someone in Iran and realise that although they may live thousands of miles apart, they have common concerns; such as good healthcare and a decent education. 'Different societies use social media in different ways. In China, it exists under heavy surveillance, but is still used to cover a huge range of topics, while in Iran, Twitter is an often-used tool for mass protests. 'Social media will continue to develop globally. It will become quicker and more dynamic to enable more conversation, but the paradox will be that those conversations will become more specific – it will become another tool in our arsenal to find out about and engage with what'sgoing on in the world.'

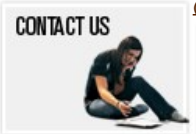
Professor Scott Lucas (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/edacs/departments/acs/staff/lucas-scott.aspx) specialises in US/UK foreign policy and international current affairs

'One of the issues is that the norms of behaviour are still evolving. It's not yet clear what is and isn't appropriate, and in order to tackle this problem, we all need to have a better understanding of social media, which will equip us to deal with issues like cyber bullying, stolen identities and the addictive effects of social media – we know people are waking up to check for text messages and status updates in the middle of the night. Social media is an extremely powerful, positive way of connecting people, but people shouldn't use it as a way to validate themselves. 'One of the advantages social media has is that it gives individuals the power to decide how they want to present themselves – they can choose to show only the positive parts of their lives and personalities. Unfortunately, the downside is that there are men pretending to be teenagers in order to engage with youngsters. 'Another negative aspect is one where bullying, abuse and obnoxious behaviour occur. In some sense, social media magnifies people's attitudes and, because they don't see the impact that their actions have on their "victims", it's easier to go further and further.'

Professor Russell Beale (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/computer-science/beale-russell.aspx) is a Professor of Human-Computer Interaction in the School of Computer Science

'We are in the early stages of understanding the significance of social media as a venue for expressing views.'Social media can be an indication of the effectiveness of democracy within a society – we're starting to see governments being swayed by large numbers of people uniting to use social media to protest, the Arab Spring being a case in point. It has the potential to empower the ordinary person to hold politicians to account. 'I started an online petition to the Albanian government in 2013, asking it to build a road in Dibra that would improve the region's economy and infrastructure. Successive opposition parties have supported the road, only to drop the plans when they came to power. I now have thousands of names on my petition and the government is starting to pay attention. We need to learn how to channel social media so that we can positively apply it to democratic processes. 'We've seen how effectively politicians like Barack Obama can use social media. However, elsewhere, politicians are using it as an alternative to meeting with the electorate face to face. This is creating a politics of popularity, where success is gauged by the number of "likes" or followers they have.'

Dr Gëzim Alpion (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/government-society/alpion-g%C3%ABzim.aspx) specialises in the sociology of success, religion, race, ethnicity, film, media and authorship



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