

Truett theologian offers guidelines for social media use

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WACO—Many Americans are “always on”—scrolling through social media, checking email or searching the internet, author Angela Gorrell, assistant professor of practical theology at Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary, noted.

In her book *Always On*, she writes about how social media spaces can be instruments of God’s unconditional love—but also sources of anxiety, jealousy and depression.

In this interview, she discusses tools for understanding social media and enabling Christian communities to address its use in constructive ways.

From your perspective as a practical theologian, are the social media strategies you recommend aimed solely at people of faith?



Angela Gorrell

Practical theology takes different forms. Ultimately, I aim to write about issues—like social media—that matter to people and shine the light of the

gospel on them. I also research and write about theology and faith in practice, how people express and perform their values, hopes and beliefs through practices, rituals, disciplines, activities, relationships, work—through their way of life. While I write about social media from a Christian perspective, much of what I have written about using social media mindfully and having “interested conversation” about media is applicable to people from a variety of religious and philosophical perspectives.

There is much talk about how people spend too much time on social media, to the point of ignoring family and friends when in their presence. How much is too much? And what problems can this create for people?

The most important thing for people to realize is that how you spend time online is more important than how much time you spend online. There are a variety of issues that “passive,” unintentional, unregulated, time online can extend and nurture. I say extend because all these issues can also be in-person issues. For example, empathy burnout, depression, anxiety and jealousy.

We often encounter an enormous amount of suffering online, and the amount of suffering and the velocity of these encounters—rapidly seeing multiple examples back to back in articles or our newsfeeds—can nurture empathy burnout. We can become numb to the suffering we see online and take it but do nothing about it or think very little of it. Likewise, being on social media and passively scrolling through people’s status updates, tweets and stories for unbounded sets of time and looking at copious amounts of content but never replying, messaging, posting or sharing has been linked to depression and anxiety.

Similarly, passive following, which is following people closely that we do not know (such as celebrities) or people we do not see regularly in person

(for example, high school friends) has been linked to jealousy, which can negatively impact how we perceive ourselves and our lives ... When we see someone a lot in person or talk to them regularly by phone, we know that their lives have a lot more going on than what they are sharing online.

What strategies do you suggest to help people use social media wisely?

The goal is meaningful participation. I encourage people to limit passive scrolling and following as much as possible. Create something and share it online. Join conversations. Reply to people's statuses rather than just clicking emojis. When you see that someone is celebrating, share their joy in a significant way. Share it as your status with a note of congratulations or text them or call them.

When you notice someone is mourning, message them. When you encounter suffering online, stop scrolling and do something in response. Get offline, take a walk and pray about this suffering. Give money to an organization that is relieving this suffering. Find other articles and educate yourself on the issue. Learn more about how to help or how to invite other people to care.

Any suggestions as to how and where people might create a space to ask and answer questions about social media use?

Asking powerful questions about people's online experiences that encourage storytelling and helping each other think about new media can happen around the dinner table, in a church small group or on a road trip in the car. When family and friends ask each other about one another's lives, we can include asking questions about and discussing social media experiences. We can ask curious, open-ended questions without simple yes or no answers like:

1. How do you make decisions about what to respond to online?

2. Have you ever been frustrated or sad about new forms of technology? What causes frustration or sadness for you?
3. When have you had a joyful experience online? Could you describe a time when you felt heard, affirmed or understood online?
4. How does social media help you love God and others and/or prevent you from loving God and others?
5. When have you had a painful experience online? Could you describe a time when you felt unheard, bullied, left out or misunderstood online?
6. What are the top two feelings you experience when using social media, and why do you think this is so?

How can we do a better job of using social media?

Develop a rhythm for life with your friends or family that specifically addresses technology—when you will use it and for what purposes, when you will not use it, what boundaries you will have. Using social media constructively requires intentionality. I encourage people to find times in their week or month or year to not use devices and social media and to write down their plan on a calendar.

A college student told me that he and his friends put all their phones in the center of the table at restaurants and say that the first person to pick up their phone during dinner pays the entire bill. Since they started this ritual, no one has picked up a phone during dinner. Practices like these help people to be present to people they are with in person.

It is a great idea to put all devices away at night one to two hours before bed so minds and bodies can get prepared for sleep. I know families that have a basket for this purpose in their homes. I especially encourage parents to make sure children under 18 do not have a device in their room during sleeping hours so they can get adequate rest. I invite people to consider turning off notifications from all social media platforms and email

and only check apps and email at a certain time each day.

It also is important to have a plan for difficult moments and conversations online. What will you do when you get angry, disagree with someone else or feel depressed about your life or feel left out? What will you do next?

It is equally important to think about what you will use social media for. How can you use social media to love people well, truly stay connected to people, expand your thinking on certain subjects, remain humble and open to being corrected, and nurture your creativity and increase your compassion? How might meaningful participation online support goals like these?