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Frowning at Facebook

Ken Briggs | Apr. 18, 2012 NCR Today

"Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?" That's the question that's begged in the May issue of the Atlantic Monthly.

The answer by the writer Stephen Marche is predictable but not unqualified. Yes it does, he writes, citing research, though he leaves room for the unlikely possibility that it can be used wisely.

His treatise has both psychological and religious implications I think.

Since I've had no experience with Facebook myself, my comments on the subject might be dismissed out of hand, and maybe they should be on those or other grounds. I speak only as someone who observes Facebook users -- and all the other social media gadgets -- and to whom Marche's article makes a lot of sense.

Marche's central tenet is that the evidence shows that we're lonely and getting lonelier. He argues that, with few exceptions, Facebook makes it worse rather than better, driving people further into themselves. Isolation and depression often show up.

A big part of the problem Marche reports is that the Facebook routine pressures users to put up a good front rather than connecting them in a face-to-face relationship that exposes our many sides.

"For the most part," he writes, "Facebook doesn't destroy friendships -- but it doesn't create them either." The compulsion toward individualism and self-determination is the engine by which "we have made ourselves lonely," so in a way we have chosen the fate that Facebook promises to reverse.

"We were promised a global village," Marche writes, "instad we inhabit the drab cul-de-sac and endless freeways of a vast suburb of information."

The electronic devices have changed the nature of human relationships -- and I don't think that's hyperbole. They alter the nature of communication and, if Marche can be believed, not generally for the better. In my view, we're only beginning to grasp the enormity of this change; Marche and the thinkers and researchers he cites are gaining the first glimpses of the emotional and psychological dangers they pose.

My sense that something is going terribly wrong could be mistaken. Those who celebrate the network world for the most part see it as the path to great liberation from isolation and into unforseen degrees of creativity and wholesome globalization.

It seems to me, however, that the microcosm -- the human loss in such interaction -- foretells trouble on a grander scale. My basis for that is largely anecdotal: I hear constant complaint from a variety of people that one or another technological vehicle -- Facebook, Twitter, cell-phones -- have had harmful effects on their ties to friends and associates. The more gadgets, the greater difficulty in even reaching them.

So far as I'm aware, religious groups are paying little to no attention to the ethical or theological dimensions of a turn toward a wholly different way of relating to one another, one that, from Marche's argument, may curtail

loving our neighbors as ourselves. By contrast, religious traditions are doing everything the can to embrace the innovations, promoting both the medium and the message uncritically.

Their enthusiasm may reflect a greater wisdom and hope than I have. Otherwise, I can't imagine anymore more significant to preach and teach about.

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