

Social Media as Chaos



www.shutterstock.com/VKA

BY RICH MAGGIANI | Fellow

I HAVE A social media habit. But it's not the kind of habit you might think. It doesn't encompass my every waking hour. I engage once in the morning and then pretty much leave it alone after that. Here's what I generally do every day.

First, I start with Facebook. I scroll through to find anything interesting, especially posts from my three kids. Then I check out LinkedIn. Who's invited me to connect? Who's endorsed me? Who's looked at my profile? I check out an article or a random post.

I don't muck much with Twitter except to search on #stcorg and #stc13. After looking at these two searches, I usually just close it. I might check out Instagram, but usually only because one of my children has posted there. Next, I check out the STC Board of Directors site to read any new posts. And I check my iPhone to see if there is any pushed content I find interesting.

One morning, though, things were particularly active. I kept getting new posts all over the place. Bing here, ping there, bop over there. (Ok, not audibly; metaphorically, but you get the idea.) I could barely keep up. For some reason that I didn't totally fathom, I wanted to check them all out. It quickly became took much, moving back and forth, forth and back, that it all became, well ... chaotic!

When that thought hit me, it just brought everything to a halt. Is social media just chaos, and we've all been sucked in to the flurry? While my computer and smart phone kept pinging and popping, I began to wonder. What if social media is a manifestation of the chaos theory? Well, that just might explain a lot.

So off to the Internet to refresh my memory about chaos theory. First, I learned that chaos theory is a field of mathematics. Right away, I liked it. After all, I was a math major in university. A major concept of chaos theory is the butterfly effect. A small change in one place—the proverbial butterfly flapping—has a profound effect on some cataclysmic event somewhere else—a tsunami, for instance. And here's the kicker. In math terms, such a succession of events is nonlinear. In other words, there is no direct connection between the two events.

Mathematics, of course, has a more technical explanation: something about dynamical systems being deterministic, but sensitive to initial conditions (I'll spare you the details). Suffice it to say that even though one event might lead directly to another event, a tiny change in that initial event can cause all hell to break loose.

Okay, so back to social media. Does this make sense? Why was I getting all these posts in such a short period of time? Did some Monarch flap its wings somewhere? Maybe social media as chaos doesn't refer to my particular situation at all, but to a larger condition of the greater social media, the one in which everyone plays.

One post can certainly cause various events. Tweet that STC is holding its annual conference, and people register. That's a direct and expected result. There have been times, though, when one small post results in completely overwhelming and unexpected results. I've seen it on Facebook and on Twitter. You probably have, too.

In the end, I guess, that's the greatest attribute of social media: the power to engender cataclysmic social disruption and change. There's not much that is loftier than that.

A final note: This is my last column as your social media columnist. It's been a great ride writing this column. And Editor Liz Pohland has been patient (my favorite trait), thoughtful, and considerate. But for me, social media has become too big a distraction, and a convenient excuse to procrastinate. I act with purpose, and while some of my social media interactions are certainly purposeful, most of them are in search of purpose. Social media has become (I'm going to say something potentially blasphemous here) what television has long since become: titillating but ultimately forgettable. Or maybe I just got tired of waiting to see that completely overwhelming and unexpected result from one of my posts. **f**



Social media has transformed the way we communicate. This column discusses the intricacies and ramifications that social media has on our everyday personal and professional lives. Suggestions for topics are welcome. Email me at rich.maggiani@solari.net.