Social media has positive possibilities in pandemic

March 27 2020, by Becky Blue

Social isolation doesn't need to be so anti-social, thanks to numerous technologies allowing people to connect in new ways from a distance. Credit: Western News

Social media has the power to both inform and deceive—and do both at speeds we have never experienced. That fact has, once again, been on

display as the COVID-19 epidemic has dominated social media platforms for weeks.

And while verifying the accuracy of information remains a concern, one Western researcher is stressing how social media is also uniquely positioned to help us cope with such a massive, complex issue.

"Social media can be very helpful," Information and Media Studies professor Anabel Quan-Haase said. "Of course, not all information out there is equally useful, but having the right connections and community can help people make sense of very complex information that is often changing rapidly.

"A lot of information is being conveyed about the pandemic in very short periods of time. Having other people help us make sense of this information is critical. Social media propagates disinformation, but it is also good at identifying and pointing out inaccurate information."

Quan-Haase, who studies the impact of social media on society, points to networks of people working to make sense of shared content by crowdsourcing comments, criticisms of certain types of information, links to other relevant sources and identifying where more knowledge is needed. They also bring together a broad collection of sources and makes it more easily available.

"Social media helps move a wide range of information from a diverse set of sources. Take my WhatsApp, where I'm getting videos from experts, updates from the World Health Organization and Germany's Koch Institute, links to funny videos, etc. I would never be able to put together such varied and relevant sources by myself. Basically, social media is doing all that work for me," she said.

Social networks can also help people feel less alone.

All levels of government have encouraged Canadians to stay connected to their loved ones using digital tools. While we might be asked to stay physically apart, no one is questioning the negative psychological consequences that isolated individuals can experience.

This is particularly true in a time of uncertainty, Quan-Haase stressed.

"Using social media to help stay connected is a great idea—particularly social media that strengthens existing bonds and helps move existing social groups online. We all belong to sets of networks –coworkers, immediate kin, extended family, friends, book clubs, religious groups. These can be activated at this time for social support.

"Social support can consist of exchanging companionship via video call or providing small services rendered by for example shopping for someone in quarantine. "

Quan-Haase gives examples such as a book club using WhatsApp to meet online while prevented from doing so in person, or having a glass of wine with a friend over video call, or text messaging with an elderly relative that lives alone. These things help to maintain a sense of connection during very stressful times, she said.

"My Twitter network has also helped show both the depth of the pandemic, but also the fact that other people are out there experiencing what I'm experiencing," Quan-Haase said. "Through jokes, humour and silly posts, it also helps us cope."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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