


SOCIAL MEDIA

a beginner's guide to
meaningful & mindful engagement



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By three methods
we may learn
wisdom: first, by
reflection, which is
noblest; second,
by imitation, which
is easiest; and
third by
experience, which
is the bitterest.

– Confucius

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This is a beginner's guide to meaningful & mindful engagement in Social Media. It is not a guide for "how to get a million followers in ten easy steps" or "how to sell snow to Eskimos online". It is about building authentic relationships and hosting meaningful conversations online. It is about being authentic and generous and kind. It is about learning the basics of social media tools so that you can foster positive exchanges.

This book was purchased at a cost of \$15. If you have received it for free and you find it useful, please be respectful and purchase your own copy at www.sophialeadership.com.

If you would like to print multiple copies of this book for use in a workshop or classroom (or if you're interested in hiring the author to conduct a workshop), please email heather@heatherplett.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Be with those who
help your being.

– Rumi

"I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones."

John Cage

INTRODUCTION

When I teach basic marketing to my communication students, I tell them that it's never a good idea to start with the negative.

But when I teach writing, I tell my students they should learn the rules and then practice breaking them effectively.

So I get to break the rules and start with the negative...

I am not a social media whiz, expert, or guru.

I don't have a very large following on any social media platform. I don't even know how to navigate my way through some of them (there are a LOT). I ignore my reader stats and pay little attention to the numbers of people following me.

I pay more attention to quality than quantity - not what most marketers would advise you to do.

I ignore most of the things that the "experts" say will help you develop a large following or be a person of influence. I don't have very high aspirations in that regard.

I don't know anything about search engine optimization or klout scores and don't ever plan on becoming an expert on those things.

Though I am self-employed and my online presence is an important part of what I do, I make only a small percentage of my income through social media. (Most of my income comes from teaching, which I love almost as much as I love writing.)

I have never had anything I've produced online go even slightly viral (unless you count a fun little video of my daughter splashing in the puddles that got over 3000 hits - woohoo).

I'm not the next best thing or the cat's pajamas or even a rising star on the internet. I don't expect I'll ever make it onto a list of "influential people to watch online".

* * * *

BUT...

Here are some of the things I've gotten out of social media:

Some of my closest, most authentic friendships started because of my blog, Twitter, and Facebook.

I was hired to teach writing and facilitation at the university partly because the administrator read my blog and loved my writing.

I have received deeply personal emails from all over the world from people I've never met about how my blog, e-books, and social media feeds have touched their lives.

I know of at least two people who have started significant business & personal ventures because they said my words inspired them to do so.

"A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves."

- Lao Tzu

I have been allowed into some really personal stories (some of which have never been shared publicly) because people saw in me authenticity and openness that shone through my social media presence.

I have developed meaningful relationships with a lot of wise people online and have compiled their wisdom into two e-books and one e-course.

Through social media, I've stayed in touch with people I've met when I traveled to places like India, Bangladesh, and Kenya. I'm also part of more than one international community of practice online - mostly involving people I've met at conferences and learning events.

One of my closest online friendships is growing into a business partnership and an upcoming learning journey to Ethiopia.

I've met several of my closest online friends in person and have found them to be as genuine, engaging, and friendly as their online presence would suggest.

I've had some incredible virtual guest speakers in my University classes - talented and generous people (most of whom are published authors) I've met online who were willing to share their wisdom via Skype with my students.

I recently walked 100 kilometres in three days with one of my favourite online friends (whom I'd never met before in person) because her story of losing a baby deeply resonated with my own story of baby loss. It was a life-changing experience.

That's a lot of goodness out of social media connections!

* * * *

Recently, I've had several people approach me with some version of the following request:

“I don't understand social media, but I see what you do and I admire it and I want similar experiences and connections. Will you help me get started?”

I'm not a teacher:
only a fellow-
traveler of whom
you asked the way.
I pointed ahead -
ahead of myself as
well as you.

- George Bernard
Shaw

It is not given us to live lives of undisrupted calm, boredom, and mediocrity. It is given us to be edge-dwellers.

– Jay Deacon

Each time I've been asked, I start to stammer and say... "But... I don't really know what I'm doing. I just show up and put myself out there and offer friendship and kindness to people and they respond in-kind. I'm no expert, and I don't know how to get a big following or sell a lot of products online. Maybe you should ask the experts."

Their response is usually something like this. "I don't want a big following. I don't want to talk to an expert. I don't need a class. I just want someone like you who will gently hold my hand and lead me at least part way into the water until I get my bearings."

It's what we all want - someone kind and non-judgmental who will help us edge our way past our fears.

The following quote reflects the way I see myself when it comes to inspiring other people in the field of social media:

"I'm not a teacher: only a fellow-traveler of whom you asked the way. I pointed ahead - ahead of myself as well as you." - George Bernard Shaw

That's what this e-book is about - me, taking your hand, and leading you gently into the water of social media.

I'm not the strongest swimmer in the bunch. I don't know my way across to the other shore any more than you do.

BUT I've been in the water long enough to know that it's not as scary a place as it looks from the shore. I've discovered the fun of splashing and diving and playing on inner tubes with my friends. I've figured out where some of the weeds are and I know how to navigate around some of the rocks that might cut our feet. I have discovered the luxury of rolling onto my back when I get tired and staring up at the sky while I float. I've found a few islands where we can climb out of the water when it gets rough and rest until we've regained our strength and want to jump back in.

I've done all this for a few years, and it's started to feel easy, but I still remember what it feels like to be the scared kid standing on the beach. And so I'm willing to help you dip your toes in, if that is

what you want. (And... seriously... if it's not what you want, I won't judge you for it. Social media is not for everyone.)

I don't promise safe navigation to the other shore, nor do I promise the water will always be pleasant. It's not my job to get you all the way to your destination.

I'm not the instructor for the deep water swims - I'll only get you part way there. Think of me as your beginning swim instructor - the one who teaches you to do head-bobs so that you'll get comfortable putting your face in the water.

Are you ready to swim? Come on in, the water's fine.

"A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves." - Lao Tzu

Hopefully, when you've worked your way through this e-book, you'll be ready to jump in and experience the water for yourself. Then, when you realize the water is safer than you thought, you'll be able to say "I did it! Myself!" When that happens, I will step graciously aside and know that my work is done.

Sell your
cleverness and buy
bewilderment.

Jalal ud-Din Rumi

Taking a new step,
uttering a new
word is what
people fear most.

– Fyodor
Dostoyevski

WHAT THE HECK IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

Social media (sometimes referred to as Web 2.0) is the kind of media that offers two way communication.

When I first worked in media relations, fifteen years ago, media was generally a one-way street. Journalists gathered information for their stories (from people like me, a former PR professional), put it together in whatever way they (and their bosses) saw fit, and fed it to us, the general public. Unless someone in the public went to the unusual effort of contacting the journalist or news outlet or writing letters to the editor, it was extremely rare for anyone to add anything to the story or offer feedback or other views once it was in print (or on TV or radio).

In the early days of the internet, it worked essentially the same way - websites were the sole property of whoever was putting them out there, and though many of them had contact boxes or email addresses for people to get in touch with them, feedback from readers was never shared publicly.

And then came the advent of the blog (web-log for short). About ten years ago (I'm no historian - you may want to double check this if it matters to you), the blog showed up on the scene and changed everything.

Anyone could have a blog. Most blog sites were free and accessible, so anyone and their dog could sign up, pick a simple template, and start putting their opinions out into the world in a public place. Just as importantly, blogs gave readers the opportunity to comment and provide feedback.

At the same time (or maybe a bit before), chat rooms and online bulletin boards or listservs started becoming all the rage and people started gathering in public spaces online and chatting with total strangers about common topics of interest - parenting, dieting, horsemanship, yoga, gun ownership... you name it.

Before long, the internet went through a seismic shift. News outlets started picking up the blog format and allowing readers to comment on their stories. Social media sites (first MySpace, then Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn... the list is now endless) came onto the scene and people could create their own profiles, post statuses, comment on other people's statuses, read what celebrities were having for lunch, respond to famous people who had never been accessible before, and reach a broad audience with their thoughts and ideas.

This brings us today, a time in which social media has revolutionized how we receive information, how we share it, and how we interact with that information and with each other. It's hard to ignore the way it infiltrates our lives.

Note: This is my version of history, not an expert's version. My only expertise is that I have worked in the field of communications/media relations for 15 years and have been paying attention to things as they develop. If you really want to get the facts straight, though, check with a historian.

Trust in yourself.
Your perceptions
are often far more
accurate than you
are willing to
believe.

- Claudia Black

MY HISTORY IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Nearly seven years ago, I waded into the waters of social media by starting my first blog (which I called “Fumbling for Words” at the time - click [here](#) for my very first blog post, which I have since migrated to my new blog). I’ve always been a writer and communicator, and have always kept a journal, so it wasn’t a huge leap for me to start writing online.

At the time, I was preparing for my first trip to Africa. I was excited about going to Africa, but I had some personal concerns about the journey that I needed to process. I’ve done quite a bit of traveling, so I wasn’t afraid for my safety nor did I worry that I might not have a good time. It was a lifelong dream to visit Africa.

What I was worried about was that the baggage (ie. white privilege) of having grown up in North America and hearing too many missionary stories about the heathens in Africa who needed to be converted might taint my experience and hinder me from developing meaningful experiences and genuine, reciprocal relationships. I didn’t want to be racist or feed into the post-colonial view that Africans couldn’t survive without intervention from “developed” nations. The added complication to my trip was that I was traveling on behalf of the [organization](#) I worked for, a non-profit that provided food and agricultural assistance to communities in need. I knew I was stepping onto African soil as a rich North American representing an organization that gave them food. Not exactly a model of the kind of relationships I wanted to foster.

We cannot escape fear. We can only transform it into a companion that accompanies us on all our exciting adventures. Take a risk a day – one small or bold stroke that will make you feel great once you have done it.

– Susan Jeffers

The more we learn to operate in the world based on trust in our intuition, the stronger our channel will be and the more money we will have.

– Shakti Gawain

I started my blog because I wanted to process some of the mixed feelings I was going through as I prepared for my trip.

Here's what I wrote on that very first post:

“I won't preach from my white-washed Bible. I won't expect that my English words are somehow endowed with greater wisdom than theirs. I will listen and let them teach me. I will open my heart to the hope and the hurt. I will tread lightly on their soil and let the colours wash over me. I will allow the journey to stretch me and I will come back larger than before.”

I'd almost forgotten I'd said those words. And yet, how true they still ring in my ears!

You could say that for the seven years I've been on social media (and probably for years before that, though I was less intentional about it), this has been my mantra - my wish for how I want to live:

I won't preach from my version of the “truth”.
I won't expect that I have greater wisdom than others.
I will listen.
I will let myself be taught.
I will open my heart to the hope and the hurt.
I will tread lightly on the soil.
I will let the colours of the earth wash over me.
I will allow the journey to stretch me.
I will come back larger than before.

I tell you this to help you understand that, for me, blogging (and social media engagement of all kinds) has always been about building meaningful connections with people and being open to other people's views, ideas, and stories. Right from the start, I was telling authentic stories about my own journey, not only for the purpose of working through my personal struggles, but also for the purpose of offering companionship to other people who might be on a similar journey. Without knowing it in that first post, I set my intention for how I wanted to interact in an online world (and in the world in general).

Before long, people started showing up at my blog - never in huge numbers, but always enough people to make me feel like I wasn't talking to myself. Soon I had a little community of people with whom I developed meaningful relationships. Some of those people are still loyal friends, nearly seven years later. I've cried with some of them, laughed with some, bought baby gifts for a few, and shared a lot of stories - sometimes in person but mostly online.

I never had a MySpace account, but when Facebook showed up on the scene and people started talking about it, I signed up. At first, I didn't really see the point and I didn't put much energy into it. I accepted the friend requests that came my way, but didn't go out of my way to reach out to other people. It took me awhile to find any value in being on Facebook. Mostly it seemed like a waste of time.

My entry point into Twitter was quite different. I'd signed up for the book club [Jamie Ridler](#) was hosting at the time, and we were working our way through *Wreck this Journal*, a book in which each page has a different way of destroying the book and making it a piece of random, destructive art. I started posting photos of my destruction on my blog, but then I realized that many of the book club members were on Twitter chatting about it and having fun together. So I wandered over to Twitter and joined them.

Almost instantly, I had a little community of like-minded book-destroying creative-thinking people on Twitter. That community quickly grew as I started connecting with other people whose blogs I was already following and/or who were following my blog.

Recently, I signed up for Google+, connected with a few people I already knew from other social media platforms, and then did very little with it. It seems like an interesting platform, with some nice improvements over other platforms, but I haven't had the time or energy to learn yet another way of engaging. I probably will some day (especially if it starts to explode like Facebook or Twitter), but not yet.

I'm also on LinkedIn, but I don't do much there either. I've developed a few contacts through that (including one guest speaker for my class), and had at least one headhunter find me there and offer me a job, but I haven't invested enough time there to know how to make it valuable.

"If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original."

— Sir Ken
Robinson

WHY SHOULD YOU BE ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

Nobody HAS to be on social media. You can lead a completely meaningful life without it. Just like people have been doing for eons, you can build all kinds of interesting relationships, experience people of other cultures, and have a fascinating life without ever opening a Facebook account.

At the same time, there are ways that social media can enrich your life if you use it in the right way and if you keep in mind that it is **nothing more than a tool for communication and relationship-building**.

Here are some of the things you might get out of having a social media presence:

- You can develop **friendships** with people all over the world without leaving your couch.
- You can **learn** about lifestyles, cultures, and world views that are very different from your own. Expanding your thinking and your global reach makes your life richer and more diverse.
- You can engage in **dialogue** with thought leaders in your field(s) of interest.
- If you're self-employed, you can make social media your **water cooler** and have a wealth of relationships even if you're alone at home in your basement office.
- When you come home from conferences and retreats and you've met people whose ideas and energy excite you, you can **stay in touch** with them and maintain some of the sense of community you developed when you were together.

Every time you don't follow your inner guidance, you feel a loss of energy, loss of power, a sense of spiritual deadness.

– Shakti Gawain

Discoveries are often made by not following instructions, by going off the main road, by trying the untried.

— Frank Tyger

- You can hear about **news stories** from people living them rather than just from the journalists reporting about them. (ie. I first learned about the earthquake in Toronto & Montreal last year as it was happening and before it hit the news sites because Twitter friends were experiencing it.)
- You can find a lot more **like-minded people** than you ever knew existed. If you have a special interest that nobody in your neighbourhood cares about, you can build community online with others with a shared interest.
- You can also find people who are not like-minded but who challenge you to expand your thinking and embrace **difference**.
- You can feel **less alone**. If you feel like an odd-ball who sees the world differently than other people you know, you can find odd-balls just like you. If you're a stay-at-home parent with nobody but small children to talk to, you can connect with other stay-at-home parents with the same frustrations (and joys).
- You can develop a broad, **global audience** for your ideas and skills. If you're a writer and you want to share your words, you can find people who might be interested in what you have to say even if you never get published (in the traditional sense). If you're an expert in bike repair and you'd like to offer your knowledge to others, you can create helpful videos for bike enthusiasts.
- You can get **opinions** from other people about things you're trying to work out. (eg. I just tweeted "Writing some notes for a social media workshop. What are your favourite things about social media?" Some of the points on this list are the result of that question.)
- You can get **quick answers, advice and links** to resources about questions you might have. For example, when I was heading to Chicago for a conference, I asked for restaurant recommendations and got some great ones.
- When you're going through a difficult personal challenge, you can find kind and generous people who will **support** you. My friend [Cath Duncan](#) (with whom I recently walked 100 km.) found a strong sense of community online that helped her get through the loss of her baby. Another friend went through a tough time financially, and people who'd never met her stepped in to help out.

That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of our time.

— John Stuart Mill

- You can gather **financial and moral support** for causes that are important to you. Sites like Kickstarter have helped several people I know follow some really amazing dreams and impact positive change. Lisa Field-Elliott, a photographer who gathers images and stories of non-profit organizations making an impact in the world, was able to raise enough money through social media contacts to fund a trip to Mexico.
- There are a lot of generous people online, willing to share their **wisdom, resources, and time**. These people care about making the world a better place and not just about the bottom line. I have invited several really smart people with impressive resumes (books published, etc.) to speak to my university classes, for example, and so far, every one of them has said “yes, I’d be happy to” and didn’t charge me a penny for it.
- It’s a great source of **information** of all kinds. If you’re doing **research** for an article or university paper, you can find lots of data and quotes through social media contacts. As Barbara Winter says, “It’s like having a global research staff tracking down useful stuff I’d never have found on my own.”
- You can develop **circles** of support, dialogue, leadership, etc. Once you’ve connected with people online for awhile, you can create **communities of practice** that will help you broaden your thinking and your outreach and challenge you to do good work in the world.

ON THE OTHER HAND... THERE ARE PITFALLS

The internet is far from perfect. There are lots of pitfalls and lots of reasons for you to be cautious about your presence online. The points below refer to social media experiences, but they could be said about almost any kind of social interaction with people.

- Social media spaces can feel way too much like **high school**. The cool kids hang out in their cliques, the bullies try to push people around, and somewhere in the middle is you, trying to keep your head above water.
- Even when you think you're an emotionally strong person, you can find yourself caught up in the **popularity contest**. When other people have more hits on their website, more Facebook friends, and more Twitter followers, you can feel like a total loser. When you put something that you think is really great and truly authentic and vulnerable out there, and nobody shows up, you can feel like a delusional fool. When you follow all of the "ten easy steps to fame" and nothing happens, you can wallow in self-criticism, beating yourself up for not being as interesting as the other people online.
- It can be **addictive** and suddenly you find yourself wasting far too much time online when you should be living your life and engaging with the people that matter to you.

Imagination is
more important
than knowledge.

– Albert Einstein

Be a first rate
version of yourself,
not a second rate
version of
someone else.

– Judy Garland

- It can become a **house of mirrors**, with relationships that are only partly real and “popularity” that can crumble at any time. Some people have developed considerable fame through social media and have later found their whole lives crumbling around their feet when the fame turned out to be smoke and mirrors.
- Sometimes people can become downright nasty and by putting yourself out there in a vulnerable way, you are exposing yourself to their **hurtfulness**.
- Just like in real life, there are **liars, con artists, and snake oil salespeople** on the internet. Chances are, even if you have really good judgement, at least once you’re going to get burned by the wrong person. Or you’ll find out that someone is not really who he/she claims to be.
- It can feel like a really **disingenuous** place sometimes, where people are trying to impress each other with their important ideas and schemes. And sometimes, when everyone is following the emperor down the street admiring his shiny clothes, you feel like the kid in the corner wanting to say “but... he’s not WEARING ANY CLOTHES!”
- You can get caught up in really **unhealthy situations and relationships** if you’re not careful. Social media can be a really scary place if you are prone to jealousy or mistrust. Your unhealthy tendencies can run rampant in a place where people share details about themselves you wouldn’t otherwise know. When you start stalking people (like ex-boyfriends for example) to see who they’re hanging out with now and whether their pictures indicate they’re having more fun than they had with you, it’s probably time to step away for awhile.
- If most people on the internet seem to feel differently from you, it is quite easy to start **doubting** yourself. Social media gives us access to far too many people’s opinions and in the face of that, it’s often hard to trust your own.
- Though social media can help make us feel less lonely, sometimes it does the opposite. If you go online looking for companionship and you discover that everybody seems to be in conversation with other people and nobody is paying attention to you, you’ll end up feeling even more **lonely** than you did to start with.
- Of course, as many anti-social-media people will tell you (your mother, perhaps, or your brother-in-law - you know who I’m talking about), there are **safety risks** involved in having an

online presence. Your personal information can be used against you. You could become the victim of identity theft. Some people might steal your work and pass it off as their own. Anything you post online is fair game and may be used to harm you or steal from you.

Only you and you alone can decide whether or not these pitfalls present too much of a danger for you. Awareness of the dangers, and the caution that I'm hoping that awareness will elicit, is the first step in ensuring you don't fall into the pit.

Openness doesn't
come from
resisting our fears
but from getting to
know them well.

– Pema Chodron

Unfortunately we
have been trained
to imitate others'
voices, not
discover our own.

–Michael Jones

MY APPROACH TO SOCIAL MEDIA

As you can see, I have never been very strategic about any of my engagement in social media. None of my entry points were planned or calculated and I didn't do a lot of research before I jumped in.

Like I do with most things in my life, I just waded in, tested the waters, and then decided whether or not to jump in. I learned to swim only by trial and error. I asked a few questions of people who knew more than I did, but I never took any classes or had any advisors.

Though I love reading and researching topics of interest to me, **I am in large part an intuitive, right-brained thinker.**

I follow gut feelings more than I follow a strategy. I don't ignore logic entirely, but it is usually secondary in my decision-making process.

I won't pretend that I haven't been hurt by social media or that I haven't gotten caught up in popularity contests, following "naked emperors", and other negative situations. I have. It's not a perfect world and I am far from perfect myself. More than once, I've considered walking away entirely, due to some ugliness or another.

That being said, I keep coming back because - at least for me - the value outweighs the cost. Each pitfall I've found myself in has been a learning experience for me and I find myself wiser, stronger, and more able to avoid the weeds and the treacherous rocks.

Here is my personal manifesto on social media (developed after 7 years in these waters):

- I follow my **intuition**. If it feels right, I do it. If I have qualms about it, I step away and re-evaluate.
- I don't do anything just because some **expert** said it's the "right" way to do social media. I have done a few of those things in the past (against my better judgement), but it just made me feel icky and I didn't gain anything by it.
- If it doesn't suit my **personality or values**, it's not right for me.
- I put the emphasis on **SOCIAL** first. It's about building **relationships**, not about becoming the most popular kid on the block. I never read my blog stats and try not to pay attention to my numbers on Twitter or Facebook. Depth of engagement is more important to me than numbers. (Some people are interested in their Klout scores, but I don't even know what that is. I plan to leave it that way.)
- When it starts to feel like I'm back in **high school**, trying to hang around with the cool kids (even though I may not really like them) just to feel popular, I step away for awhile. There are lots of ways that social media can become unhealthy, and if I spot those signs in myself, I know it's time for a break.
- I don't do anything until I feel **ready** for it. Just because Google+ is getting lots of buzz, doesn't mean I have to be there right away.
- When it comes to social media, I put more attention on **quality** rather than quantity. Meaningful relationships trump huge followings.
- I trust my **instincts** when it comes to people. If they seem like "my people", I connect with them and see where the relationship goes. If they seem like all hype and no substance, I stay away even if everyone else on the internet is raving about them. (That has stood me in good stead more than once when someone I was leery of saw their reputation begin to crumble like a house of cards.)

Conversation is a
practice field for
finding our voice.

- Michael Jones

Dialogue is indeed
the vessel that can
hold the heat of
transformation.

– John Huss

- I read **very few popular blogs** and mostly stick with people I've built some trust with or who intrigue me. Some of the best writing out there is on the blogs that few people visit. Too much hype often means they're trying too hard to please the masses, and that doesn't do much to draw me in.
- If people connect with me, I connect with them. I don't care if they're the "cool kids" or not. Engage me in a **meaningful** conversation online, and I will respond.
- I don't use **artificial** means of getting followers. Some people use "bots" to follow people who tweet about topics they're interested in, to try to increase their own numbers, but that feels disingenuous to me. (As Scott Stratten of UnMarketing fame says "If you wouldn't send a robot to a networking party on your behalf, why would you get one to do your social media engagement for you?")
- I don't have a **smartphone** (or any kind of cellphone, for that matter - I may be one of the last people in the developed world) and so I don't do any social media when I'm on the go. If I'm away from my laptop, I'm away from social media. I like it that way. It keeps me mindful of my surroundings and the people I'm engaging with in real life. It also helps me have a healthy non-addictive relationship with social media (not to mention a healthier relationship with my family).

How willing are we to color outside the lines of the activity in which we are accomplished and secure? What would it be like to let our creative energies run free like wild horses in new pastures?

– Thomas Ryan

BEFORE YOU WADE TOO FAR INTO THE WATER

Because of the pitfalls I mentioned above, it's a good idea to spend some time evaluating your intentions with social media. Asking yourself the following questions may help:

Why do I want to be on social media? To build friendships? To grow my business reach? To learn more about other people in the world? To share my writing and expertise? To do research? (Note: there may not be one simple reason, but rather a combination.)

Are there unhealthy aspects to my personality that have flared up in past relationships that may be of concern? Am I prone to jealousy? Am I overly self-critical? Do I get easily caught up in popularity contests? Does it matter to me too much what other people think? Do I try too hard to impress people?

Am I emotionally healthy enough to survive the pitfalls when they come? Will I crumble the first time someone leaves a nasty comment on my blog? Will it hurt too much if nobody follows me or reads my blog?

Do I trust my gut feelings about who to engage with and who to steer clear of? Have those gut feelings been wrong before and what were the consequences? What have I learned from past experiences?

What will I do when I start feeling icky about a situation or exchange? Am I prepared to walk away for the sake of my own mental health? Do I have enough self-awareness to know when I am not being true to myself? Do I have friends I trust who will hold me accountable?

To what degree am I willing to be vulnerable and authentic in a public space? Does it feel like too much of a risk for me?

How will I guard against addiction or unhealthy use of social media? Do I have enough self-control to walk away when I know I've been spending too much time online? How will I respond if my family accuses me of caring more about the internet than about them?

We have a sacred responsibility to encourage and illuminate all that is inherently good and special in each other.

– John O'Donohue

GUIDELINES FOR ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

Everyone will find his/her own way for engaging online, depending on their purpose for being there. As a starter, though, I would recommend these general guidelines.

1. **Be supportive of people.** Social media is a reciprocal place. Share what others are doing that might interest your followers and there's a good chance they'll do the same for you. Be generous, and don't do it with an expectation that "if I send one link, they'll send one link". As you were probably told in kindergarten "Share and share alike." Consider it good karma and just keep giving even if you don't feel like you're getting back an equal share. What goes around comes around - some day you'll get your share.
2. **Share what you find.** People appreciate good information, stories, links, etc. For many people, that's what they're online for. If you read something that interests you, share it.
3. **Give credit where credit is due.** Credit the people you get information/stories/art/etc. from and be sure to credit the originators of the ideas as well. This is ethical practice in general, but on top of that, it often works in your favour. Sometimes when you credit a well known writer or artist, they'll find the link you shared and respond. (For example, I once blogged about something [Stephen Pressfield](#) had written and his assistant got in touch with me and asked if I wanted to interview him for my blog. I did.)

All you need to do to receive guidance is to ask for it and then listen.

– Sanaya Roman

Try not to become
a man of success
but a man of value.

– Albert Einstein

4. **Talk to people who interest you.** If someone says something provocative or interesting, respond. If you have something to add to a conversation, offer it. Remember - if people are having conversations in public spaces like Twitter, it generally means the conversation is fair game and everyone is welcome in. Even if you think the person is too famous or intimidating to care about what you have to say, try it anyway. Some may never respond, but most do. You may strike up friendships you never expected.
5. **Don't over-share and risk boring people.** For the most part, it's true what the naysayers say - nobody wants to know what you had for breakfast, unless it's really interesting or funny or you have a food blog and you're sharing the recipe. If you overload your followers' feeds with too much useless information about yourself, they'll quickly hit un-follow. On the other hand...
6. **Share enough about yourself (or your company) that your personality (or brand) shines through.** If you have a wacky sense of humour, share it. If you have an unusual amount of knowledge about space stations, share it. Your unique personality is what draws people to you, especially if they have similar interests and hobbies. Don't be a clone of someone else - let your individuality shine. The same goes for your business - if you have a unique offering, put it out there in all its shiny glory.
7. **Make friends.** Have fun with people, just like you would if you met them in person, and when a spark of friendship ignites, feed the flame. Don't be shy - be friendly. If a friendship starts to deepen, consider taking it to Skype or a one-on-one chat. Don't flaunt your friendships in public spaces (and risk being seen as the high school kid trying to show off how cool he is by who he associates with), but don't shy away from them either.
8. **Share your stories.** I'm a big believer in stories. Everyone has interesting stories that are worth sharing. Stories change the world. Stories shift our perception of things, change our paradigms, and help us see the world through each other's eyes. Stories build community and connect us with each other despite our differences. The world needs more stories. The world needs YOUR stories. If only one person feels less alone because he/she can find something in your story to relate to, then it was worth sharing it.

How wonderful it is
that nobody need
wait a single
moment before
starting to improve
the world.

– Anne Frank

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Following is a non-comprehensive list of some of the most common social media platforms (at least the ones that are common in my part of the world, ie. North America). Because these platforms have been known to change from one month to the next, I have not given very specific instructions for where to find things and how to navigate. Once you've gotten started, you'll have to trust yourself to find the things you need. Most of them are fairly intuitive.

Blogs:

You'll hear all kinds of opinions about the longevity and importance of blogs. Some will say they're here to stay and others will insist they're soon to go the way of the dodo bird. I'm a member of the former camp. I think blogs are here to stay, in some fashion or another, for a long, long time.

What is a blog? Simply put, it's a place for a person or organization to keep an online journal, share opinions, stories, photos and videos, and invite feedback from other people. "Blog" is short for "web log".

There are many, many kinds of blogs out there, on every topic you can imagine. People blog about their kids, their favourite recipes, the state of the world, their love of horses, their opinions about celebrity fashion - you name it. Whatever your interest is, you can find a blog about it somewhere.

The first time I taught a Writing for PR class, I made my students start blogs, and no two people blogged on the same topic. There was a blog about B-movies, another about a self-imposed Facebook hiatus (in which I learned a lot about the dangers of Facebook addiction among young adults), another about fitness, another about video games, and even one about how much the person loved the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Imagine it, Google it, and you'll find a blog about it.

Lots of businesses and organizations are starting blogs too (though, as a former public relations professional, I have been known to argue that blogs are most interesting if they come from a personal perspective rather than the corporate party line). Journalists have blogs that they write alongside their media articles, for more of a personal spin. Authors start blogs to promote their new books. Politicians start blogs to connect with their voters.

If you decide to start a blog, you can make it as simple or as complex as you choose. You can use a free site like blogger.com, wordpress.com or typepad.com to build a blog with one of the templates they provide, or you can get more complicated (which may involve hiring a designer who knows CSS programming language) and build a wordpress.org or squarespace.com blog for you. (This is far from an exhaustive list - there are lots of other ways of building blogs, and most of them are free.)

Group Blogs

One of the many fun ways of using blogs is to create a group blog where multiple writers can contribute. This can be done from most blog platforms, but the most effective I've seen is through posterous.com. With a posterous blog, you can provide all participants with an email address where they can send their posts, photos, etc. to and they will be automatically posted. If, for example, you are at a learning event, conference, or retreat, and you want to host a space where participants' stories, photos, etc. can be harvested and shared with each other and the world, a posterous blog is a fun and easy platform to use. Simply provide the email address in the registration package for the event and invite people to send whatever they wish to the group site. This makes the storytelling more of a group effort and less bogged down by corporate-speak.

Getting starting in blogging:

1. Before you start a blog, ask yourself some questions.
 - a. What's the purpose of my blog?

Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not; remember that what you now have was once among the things you only hoped for.

– Epicurus

- b. Will I blog about a specific theme (eg. my favourite recipes), or will it be a general blog about the stories of my life?
- c. Do I want to include photos, videos, or audio files?
- d. Am I hoping to generate income from my blog?
- e. Is this blog attached to a business, non-profit, or other organization? If so, am I allowed to express my own opinion, or do I need to tow the party line?

2. Sign up for a free blog at [Blogger](#), [Wordpress](#), or any of the other blog sites.
3. To start with, choose one of the templates available on the site. As you get more proficient at it (or if you hire a designer) you can adapt the templates or make one of your own, but for starters, the free templates work just fine.
4. What you're planning to do on your blog will help determine which template you'll use. Some are more conducive for sharing photos, while some have wider blog posts for largely text-based posts. If you plan on adding a lot of additional links, you may want to choose a style that has three columns instead of two.
5. Write a profile of yourself and/or what will be found on the blog. Keep it simple and appealing. Add an inviting photo that will draw people in when they visit.
6. Add widgets on the side. This is set up differently in each blog program, but I believe that most of them use the term "widgets" for the little things in the sidebar that people can click on (eg. links to your photos, links to your favourite blogs, etc.). Don't be afraid to play with them. Even if you add something that doesn't work, it's pretty simple to delete it and start over again.
7. Start blogging. Write whatever you want. Write a few posts (for practice and to help establish your voice on the blog) and then start letting people know where they can find your blog.
8. Look for other blogs that interest you and start commenting on them. That's one of the best ways to start getting traffic to your site. Many people who get new visitors on their site will click over to see who's visiting. If they like what they see, they may come back. Start developing relationships this way and you never know what might happen.
9. Use other social media sites to send people to your blog. When I started blogging, blogs were stand-alone sites and you got to know people through commenting on each others' blogs, etc. Now that there are so many other places for conversation, people don't leave as

I don't need a friend who changes when I change and who nods when I nod; my shadow does that much better.

- Plutarch

We evolve at the
rate of the tribe
we're plugged into.
– Caroline Myss

many comments on blogs, but instead they do their commenting on Facebook, Twitter, etc. If you're going to blog, I'd recommend that you also get involved in other places and promote your blog that way.

10. Need help? Click the help button on the blog platform you're using, or type your question into Google (eg. How do I had photos to a Typepad blog?) to see what shows up. There are many forums for bloggers where such questions are answered in user-friendly ways.

* * * *

Twitter:

My love for Twitter has been known to ebb and flow. Most of the time, it is my favourite social medium, but some days it feels like the shallow end of the pool. There are days when it seems like everyone is on there strictly to brag about themselves or to sell their products. On other days, it seems like no matter what you put out there or who you try to engage with, everyone ignores you. On those days, I usually find some other way of investing my time.

But on the good days, when people are being genuine and conversational and non-sleazy-salesperson-y, it is a lot of fun and can offer a lot of good information, resources, connections, and business opportunities.

Twitter is the most public and free-flowing of the social media platforms. Unless you lock your profile and only share it with people you invite (which you can do, but it's rare), anyone can read your updates and anyone can share them with their followers. (That can be both a blessing and a curse.) Either way, when you enter the world of Twitter, you have to keep in mind that your boss, your mom, or your children's sunday school teacher could be reading what you post. (Even if they don't follow you, they could search for you and find your stream, or stumble on it by accident.)

On the plus side, the fact that anyone could be reading your updates gives you a tremendous opportunity to let your voice be heard. You can contribute to the public discourse on topics you're interested in, find (and be found by) people who have similar interests, and build your platform if you have a business to promote or political campaign to run.

Getting started on Twitter

Here are a few early steps for your journey on Twitter. These are simply guidelines to help you enter the stream - what you do with them is up to you.

1. Sign up. Either choose your name, business name, or something you want to be identified with. Unless you're certain you want to be linked with a certain brand, idea, or passion, (eg. marathonrunner, petlover, fashiondesigner) I'd suggest you start with your real name so that people can find you and know who you are.
2. Create a profile. Think about the kinds of people you want to attract when you write your profile. Do you want to associate with other pet lovers? Then add that information in your profile. Do you want people to hire you for your fashion design? Then let people know that is your expertise. Do you want people to think you're funny? Then say something humorous in your profile. If you're in business, you would call this branding, but if you're just signing up for yourself, it's about the way you want to be identified. If you want people to find your business or blog, be sure to add a link.
3. Find some people you are interested in and follow them. Favourite authors, bloggers, friends, public figures, politicians, etc. Some of them might follow you back, and some won't. Don't just choose high profile people whose streams are littered with people trying to get close to them. Choose some average low-profile people with interesting things to say. You'll have much more interesting conversations if you do.
4. Download a Twitter reader program. I would recommend that you start off with something like [Seesmic](#) or [Tweetdeck](#), readers that will give you more options for how you read your Twitter stream. Both of these can be customized so that you have one column for all of your tweets, one for just those that mention your name (so that you can quickly see who's responding to you), one for your favourite tweeters, and others for the topics you most want to follow. (You can do much of this in Twitter as well, but the screen view is not as customizable - you have to click on the tabs instead of seeing multiple streams in your window.) You can also add other social media streams such as Facebook or LinkedIn.
5. Start sharing things you're interested in and that will appeal to the kinds of people you want to connect with. Found a funny [Youtube](#) video? Share it. Read a thought-provoking blog post? Send a link. Discovered a great sale on shoes? Share it. Found a quote that fits in 140

I wear my shadows
where they're
harder to see, but
they follow me
everywhere. I
guess that should
tell me I'm
travelling toward
light.

- Bruce Cockburn

You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions.

– Naguib Mahfouz

characters? Pass it on. Even if your only follower for the first week is your brother-in-law, start sharing things with him.

6. Share things that you've learned, discovered, or seen - little anecdotes that make up your life. What are you reading? What movies have you seen lately?
7. Connect with people. If one of the people you're following asks for a restaurant recommendation in your favourite city, hit "reply" and send a recommendation (even if the person is famous and you're intimidated). If someone says something funny, tell them so. If you have something to add to a conversation, jump in and respond. It's important to hit reply or to use their Twitter name in your tweet so that they know you're responding to something they said (and that way it will show up in their Twitter stream even if they're not following you.)
8. Return tweets. If you see a status that has an "RT" at the beginning, it means that someone is sharing a tweet that they read in someone else's stream with their own readers. It's a great way to share the things that you like, a nice way to stroke other people's egos (everyone likes to know they're sharing valuable things), and a good way to let people know that you're interested in similar things. It's also an important way to give credit where credit is due instead of passing something off as your own thought or discovery. Use it wisely and often.
9. Use hashtags. This is a hashtag - #. It's what people use if they want their tweets to be associated with a specific topic, event, campaign, news story etc. It makes things easier to find, because in most Twitter Readers (eg. Seismic) you simply have to click on the hashtagged word and a whole stream of tweets on the topic will show up in a window. If, for example, you're tweeting while Hurricane Irene is whipping around outside your window, use #hurricaneirene and anyone searching for information on the hurricane will find your tweets. If you just shook hands with the US President, use #obama and it will show up in anyone's stream who's searching for him.
10. Search Twitter topics to find like-minded and/or interesting people. If you're interested in sustainable living, search for any words you might associate with your passion, and see who shows up. If you like what someone is tweeting, click on their profile and follow them. If you're a fashion designer or a rock painter, search those words and see who shows up.
11. Follow people your friends (or the people you'd like to be friends with) are following and/or chatting with. Generally the people whose thoughts most resonate with us will be

connected to other people with similar passions, ideas, etc. This can also be accomplished by clicking on the “similar to” column on the sidebar of Twitter to find people who Twitter thinks may be similar to you or your friends. Or click on “Who to Follow” on the top to find other recommendations.

12. Direct Messages (DM). This feature allows you to communicate directly with people in your Twitter stream in a private way. It’s still only 140 characters long though, so it doesn’t replace email. And the limiting factor is that you both have to be following each other in order to exchange DMs. It is handy, though, as a quick direct response to someone’s tweet if you want to make it more personal.
13. Tweet chats. You can host (or join in on) tweet chats. Some people with an online presence post a specific time they will be on Twitter for a chat on their blog (or other social media), invite people to participate, and usually choose a certain theme for the chat. For example, if you’re a yogini and want to host a yoga chat, let your friends know what time, and then set up a hashtag for the chat (eg. #yogachat). If all participants use the same hashtag, it’s easy to click on that hashtag and have all related tweets show up in a separate window.
14. Need help? Throw your question out to Twitter-land and there’s a good chance you’ll get an answer. In general, I’ve found people on Twitter to be generous and helpful.
15. Have fun. Don’t take yourself too seriously. Don’t try to put weight in every tweet. Do what you’d do at a cocktail party and add lightness along with the heavier conversation.

* * * *

Facebook:

A few days ago, I would have said that between Facebook and Twitter, Facebook is the more intimate medium since you have ‘friends’ instead of ‘followers’. That statement has become a half-truth though, because Facebook seems to be the most rapidly changing social medium and just this week they released a new feature in which you can subscribe to someone’s feed even if you are not a friend. Subscribers won’t get to see the complete stream (you choose which statuses you share with friends and which will be available to subscribers), but it is definitely becoming less private and more easy to build a public platform.

If you're willing to fail interestingly, you tend to succeed interestingly.

– Edward Albee

That being said, when you create a personal profile on Facebook, and if you don't choose to allow for subscribers, you have an intimate space that only your friends participate in. You can choose who's in the circle and who stays outside.

At the same time, though, it should be mentioned that you can create public spaces in Facebook as well, and if you're in business, this may serve as one of your greatest online tools. You can create a business or blog page, where you engage with your customers, blog readers, clients, donors, patrons, etc., or you can create an event page where all of the participants at an event you're hosting can engage with each other and build some hype around the event.

Getting started on Facebook:

1. Sign up. To get started, create a Facebook profile. Once again, unless you're in the witness protection program, or you're sure that the only way you want to be identified online is through your business brand, I would recommend using your real name. You can add as much or as little to your profile as you want. Use a photo that easily identifies you, or use one that's obscure and doesn't show people your face if you prefer. Include links to the high school you attended (especially if you want to be found by old high school friends), include your interests (music, movies, hobbies, etc.), include your marital status, include information about where you work or live... or don't. It's your choice. Some people prefer to start with just the bare minimum, but others are okay with being more open about their interests, career, etc. Because I am a writer intentionally building a public persona online, I tend to share a fair bit of information about myself, but you have to make your own choice.
2. Find your friends. Start searching for people you know, people you once went to school with, people you connected with at the last conference you attended, or people who share community spaces with you. Invite the people you want to surround yourself with to share your Facebook space. I find that I especially like what Facebook has to offer after I've been to a retreat, conference, or learning event and I want to stay in touch with the interesting people I met there.
3. Don't be shy. When I first joined Facebook, I was reluctant to friend people that I didn't feel I had a "right" to call friends because I didn't know them well or hadn't had a conversation with them in a long time. Now I've gotten more bold and make friends with people who interest me. Sometimes I've found them through Twitter or blogging, or sometimes I connect with them because we have mutual friends and I know they'd fit my community well.

This world of ours... must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be, instead, a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect.

– Dwight D. Eisenhower

In every community, there is work to be done. In every nation, there are wounds to heal. In every heart, there is the power to do it.

– Marianne Williamson

4. Status updates. Your status is the box that says “What’s on your mind?” You can fill that box with whatever you want - your own words, photos, videos, links to websites, etc. When you click on the status box, a drop-down box will appear on the bottom right that will let you select whether your status can be seen only by your friends, by the public, or by some custom setting that you choose.
5. Stream. Your Facebook stream is what appears on the page when you sign on to Facebook. It includes the statuses of anyone you are friends with or any of the pages you like. You can choose whether it will show the “most recent” or the “top news” by clicking on the tab on the top right.
6. Responding to other people’s statuses. One of the things that makes Facebook a little more useful than Twitter is that it maintains each conversation separately instead of just adding comments to the stream. If you post something, and people want to respond to it, they can add comments and they can “like” your status and that will remain attached to the status.
7. Mentioning people in your status. People like to see their names appear in other people’s statuses. It makes us feel less alone to know that we matter to each other. Make mention of the people who are impacting you, those who you’re spending time with, and those you’re learning from. Don’t be a name dropper and don’t fall into the trap of the popularity contest (“I can mention more cool kids in my status than you can - nyah, nyah!”), but make people feel loved and cared for. When you mention someone, your status will show up in their stream and they’ll get a notification that you mentioned them. Facebook has made mentioning people easy. When you type a capital letter and start typing the name, a box with the people whose name starts with that letter shows up and you can choose the one you want.
8. Public pages. Look for businesses, bands, authors, community groups, artists, television shows, magazines, learning institutions, non-profit organizations, etc. that you’re interested in. Most organizations and public figures now have public Facebook pages that you can “like” rather than “friend”. Their statuses will appear in your stream along with those of your friends and you can comment on them or write on their walls. It’s a good way to stay in the loop with your favourite sports team, band, community organization, etc.
9. Just as I mentioned in Twitter, start sharing things that are of interest to you - links to interesting Youtube videos, fascinating photos, thought-provoking articles, etc. Share things that you find in your friends’ statuses (and give them credit for finding it first), share quotes, and share your own wisdom.

10. Upload photos, videos, etc. This is where Facebook differs from Twitter. You can create a more complete profile, share your family vacation photos, add videos of your dog on waterskis, etc. It's a good idea to upload at least a few photos that you want to have associated with you, because on your profile page there is a band of 5 photos that will appear. These are photos that you or someone else has added that have been tagged with your name on them.
11. Tagging photos. When you upload photos, you have the option of adding captions, additional information, and tags. You can tag any of your friends on the photo, and once they are tagged, the photo will appear in their stream.
12. Pages. If you have a business or blog, I'd recommend starting a separate page for that. That way, people who don't know you personally but want to follow what you're writing about or selling can do so without feeling like they're infringing on your private space. And that way you don't have to mix your personal relationships (and less professional interactions) with your business ones. Do that by clicking on "Account" on the upper right, then "Account Settings", and then "Create a Page" at the bottom of the page. Then choose what kind of page you want to create - local business or place; company, organization or institution; brand or product; artist, band or public figure; entertainment; or cause or community.
13. Private messages. Facebook has an inbox that works like an email system. Click on the little icon that looks like a conversation bubble at the top left to open your messages. Begin typing the name of the friend you want to contact, and their name should pop up. If you see a little red number appear on that icon, it means that you have messages waiting for you.
14. Games and other time-wasters. There are lots of time-wasters on Facebook that I know little about. For awhile, lots of people were hooked on Farmville and other similar games. Sometimes these games show up in their status and it can get a little annoying. If you don't like what's showing up, hover your mouse over their status and a small x will appear in the top right. Click on it and then choose whether you want to hide that particular status, everything from that person, or statuses like that one. (And if you want advice on how to play Facebook games, you'll have to find someone else to give you that advice, because that's not my particular vice or area of expertise.)
15. Changing settings. By clicking on "Account" and then "Privacy Settings", you can change your settings and make them as tight or loose as you want. If you don't want certain people seeing your updates, you can edit that. If you want to block some people, you can do that too. You can also make lists of your friends (eg. business contacts, family, etc.) and only let

There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community.

- M. Scott Peck

certain lists see certain updates. My only word of caution is that you should always be aware that whatever you put out there can eventually end up being public. If you say something nasty about someone and think only your family can see it, you're forgetting that one day your sister-in-law might be annoyed with you and can choose to quote you on her status. In other words, don't put anything online that you're not comfortable with your mother-in-law or your third grade teacher seeing.

16. Chat. At the bottom right of your screen is a little grey box that says "chat". (Unless Facebook has changed it by the time this comes out.) If you want your friends to know when you're online and you don't mind being available for chatting, leave it on the default setting. I don't really like the chat room, because I don't like getting caught in a chat that may make me feel obligated to staying by my computer (unless it is pre-arranged and I've dedicated the time to it), so I prefer to have my status set as "offline". To change this, click on the grey box, click on the star in the top right corner, and either click "available to chat" so that the check box beside it disappears, or click "limit availability" to set your own boundaries.

* * * *

LinkedIn:

If you want to establish a professional identity online, LinkedIn is a good place to start. It's considered the social medium for professionals, and it's a good place to put your professional credentials, experience, resume, etc.. If you want to find other people doing similar work as you, be found by headhunters looking for people with your qualifications, promote yourself as a consultant, have conversations with people about the kind of work you're involved in, etc., LinkedIn is the right place to do it.

I have a profile on LinkedIn, but am not very active there. I confess that I haven't given it enough time to really discover its value. Unless you have a lot of time on your hands, or you want to market yourself as a social media expert (which I do not, despite the fact that I'm putting out this guidebook), it's not really wise to engage too deeply in too many places. So far, Twitter and Facebook give me enough social media interaction for now.

That being said, I have found some value in LinkedIn. When I was looking for someone to make a presentation to my class, I searched the criteria I needed for the city I'm in and came up with

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live.

~George Bernard Shaw

While the spirit of neighborliness was important on the frontier because neighbors were so few, it is even more important now because our neighbors are so many.

– Lady Bird Johnson

some local experts. I've also been contacted by other people looking for someone with my criteria in my location, and was even scouted for a job by a local headhunter.

Getting started on LinkedIn:

1. Create your professional profile. In this case, you'll want to give more thought to how you want to appear professionally than you might have on Facebook or Twitter. This is the place where you're most likely to be found by potential employers, consulting clients, etc., so spend as much time polishing this profile as you might on a resume. Be sure to include relevant links to your website, blog, etc., so that people can find your work.
2. Add people. Click on "contacts" and then "add contacts" to begin finding people. Find the people you want to connect with (professional contacts, work colleagues, clients, etc.) and add them. Note: one of the things I find challenging about LinkedIn is that you have to define your relationship with them (eg. whether you did business together, worked at the same place, etc.) and their definitions don't always line up with the connections I've made, especially the ones I've made online. Once you've created your profile and made a few connections, LinkedIn will begin making recommendations of people you may know, based on where you've worked or who you're connected to.
3. Recommendations. One of the valuable things about LinkedIn is that you can add recommendations to other people's profiles and they can add them to yours. For example, I invited someone to speak to my university class and after they visited, I added a recommendation that now shows up on their profile saying they did a great job and were appreciated by my class.
4. Groups. Click on "Groups" and start searching for ones you might be interested in. If you're in a professional association, for example, they might have a LinkedIn group you can be part of. Once you're part of the group, you can participate in conversations on their page. It's a good way to learn about what's going on in your industry and make connections with other people doing similar work. It can also be a good way of sharing your expertise when you respond to queries with helpful information and links. Don't be shy to send people to your site if you have information that might be valuable to them.
5. Updates. Just like Facebook and Twitter, you have an opportunity to add an update with information about what you're working on, things you want to talk about, or links to good resources. I haven't used that feature, but instead I use the option which allows my Twitter feed to be seen on my LinkedIn page. That means that my page stays active and LinkedIn

followers can see what I'm sharing, but I don't have to worry about updating yet another social media space.

6. Jobs. If you've been thorough in creating your profile to reflect the kind of work you're qualified for and want to do, LinkedIn will sort through the available jobs and make recommendations to you. You can also post jobs on LinkedIn if you are hiring.

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Google+:

As far as I can tell from my limited use of it so far, Google has paid careful attention to what works best on Facebook and Twitter and has tried to create a platform that incorporates all of their best features. This might work one of two ways - make it redundant and therefore unnecessary, or make it the most effective platform so far and wipe out the competition. Judging by recent rapid climbs in subscriptions (it only officially opened to the public a few days ago and was by invitation only before that), it is quickly becoming a contender for most popular social media. Only time will tell.

Getting started on Google+:

1. Create a profile. Just like the other social mediums, you have to start with a profile. If you want people to find you, add a photo to make yourself recognizable. If you don't mind people knowing where you work and are okay with being found on searches for your workplace or alma mater, include that information. Make your profile as interesting, professional, or funny as you want it to be. Think about what identity you want to portray in this space. (But don't overthink it - you can tie yourself in knots if you do.)
2. Add photos, status updates, links, etc. (I won't say much about this, as it's fairly similar to other social media. Do what you want to do, share what you want to share - just click away and find the things you need to find.)
3. Circles. Finding a middle ground between the "follow" feature of Twitter and the "friend" feature of Facebook, Google allows you to add people into your circles. You can build your circles however you want (eg. friends I met in high school, people I don't really like but I feel like stalking, my favourite people in the world, etc.), or you can accept their pre-defined categories to establish each person according to their level of familiarity (friend, family, acquaintance, following). This allows you to choose how personal you will be with each

Each of us is a being in himself and a being in society, each of us needs to understand himself and understand others, take care of others and be taken care of himself.

- Haniel Long

circle. You can share intimate updates (eg. “My cat is dying.”) with just your family, or share public updates (“My book just got published - buy it on Amazon!”) with everyone. Personally, this feature stresses me out a little because I have a hard time categorizing people. If I chatted with you on Twitter a few times, does that make you a friend, acquaintance, or follower? On the other hand, I can see the value of it if I want to share certain information with people who are interested in similar hobbies without running the risk of boring everyone else.

4. Hangouts. I haven’t used this feature yet, but it looks interesting. In hangouts, you can have a video chat with up to 10 people at the same time for free. You could do this on Skype too, but you have to pay to upgrade your subscription if you want that feature. Facebook has also added a video chat, but so far you can only see one other person.
5. Search. From what I can tell so far, the search feature on Google+ is quite powerful and possibly better than on other social media. (Which is not surprising, given the fact that Google built its empire on its search engine.) It’s easy to find other people talking about things you’re interesting in or can contribute to.

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Flickr:

If you’re a photographer, then Flickr may be the best social medium for you to invest your time in. I’ve been on Flickr for many years, but so far it’s mostly been a place to store my photos and share them with family and friends. (I’ve selected an option on my Flickr profile that automatically posts an update on Facebook when I’ve added new photos on Flickr, so my Facebook friends can see my new photos.)

My sister is an avid photographer, and has been much more active on Flickr than I have been. Through watching her, talking to her, and exploring it on my own, here are some of the things I’ve learned.

Getting started on Flickr:

1. Subscription. With a free subscription, you can create a profile and upload quite a few photos. (I don’t know exactly how many, but certainly enough to make it a worthwhile start.) If

"Independence"...
[is] middle-class
blasphemy. We are
all dependent on
one another, every
soul of us on
earth.

– G.B. Shaw

you're planning to get quite involved and share a lot of pictures, however, I'd recommend upgrading to a "pro" status for a cost of \$24.95/year. It's been a worthwhile investment for me.

2. Uploading photos. Flickr has made it quite easy to upload photos (and videos, though that's a less popular feature so far). Once you've signed up, simply click on "upload photos and video" and start loading. You can label your photos, add them to sets, add stories or content information, identify their location, identify what kind of camera you used, etc. If you want your photos to be found in searches, make sure you clearly identify them. (eg. A few years ago, after a trip to India, I uploaded a bunch of photos and labeled them with the places I visited. I was contacted by a magazine that found one of my images and wanted to use it in their publication. I was paid \$50 for it.)
3. Once you've uploaded photos, you can add them to sets, and then you can arrange those sets into collections. For example, you can create sets for "vacation 2009", "vacation 2010", etc., and then you can create a collection with these sets called "family vacations". Photos can be in a variety of sets (eg. a vacation photo can also be in a set called "my children").
4. Groups. Once you have some photos online, you can start joining groups and adding photos to groups where they will be more publicly shared. For example, you can create a group for a special event you attended, and then invite all of the participants at the event to add their photos to that group so that you have a shared scrapbook. (I did this recently when I attended a conference, and it was fun to see the event through other people's eyes.) Or if you like certain types of photography (macro photography, bokeh, etc.) there are lots of public groups available. Some people join groups in which they're given a different theme to photograph each week, or where they have to take 100 photos of strangers, or where they have to add one photo every day. It's a fun way to practice your photography skills.
5. Comments. Once you've joined a few groups and added photos, it's a good idea to start perusing the groups for photos that capture your attention and leave comments for the photographer. Comments can be encouragement, tips, questions, etc. Once you start to interact with people, they will likely return the favour and start checking out your photos. When people comment on your photos, visit their photostreams and do the same for them.
6. Favorites. When you're perusing other people's photos, you can identify the photos you really like as your "favourite" and Flickr will save them in a folder for you to look through when you need inspiration. If you're in the process of learning more about photography and

On this shrunken globe, men can no longer live as strangers.

– Adlai E. Stevenson

I nod to a passing stranger, and the stranger nods back, and two human beings go off, feeling a little less anonymous.

– Robert Brault

want to challenge yourself, this is a good way to save ideas for future use. When you visit someone else's profile, you can check out which photos they've identified as their favourites to find other ideas.

7. **Contacts.** When you find people you know on Flickr or you're inspired by someone and you want to keep track of the new photos they're uploading, you can identify them as a contact (family, friend, or category of your choosing). Their newest photos will then appear on your home page under "Contacts".
8. **Public or private.** You can choose whether you want to share photos publicly or just with certain contact lists. If, for example, you have several family members on Flickr and they are identified as such on your contact list, you can share photos of the family barbecue without making them public.

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Youtube:

Youtube is similar to Flickr except that you share videos instead of photos. It's free and easy to use. If you are an avid filmmaker, whether professional or amateur, or if you want to share tips and ideas about your area of expertise or passion, Youtube may be the right medium for you.

One of the most interesting ways I have used Youtube was as a promotional tool for an upcoming conference. I connected with many of the faculty ahead of time on Skype and asked them to share their three words for impacting positive change in the world. I recorded them (via Skype plus a simple and inexpensive recording program called e-camm), and then uploaded them onto a Youtube channel!. The videos were then shared via the conference's website and Facebook page.

Getting started on Youtube:

1. Like other mediums, get started by creating a profile and uploading your videos. The directions for this are quite straightforward. Once you upload videos, you can label them, write additional information about them, put them into separate channels, etc.
2. Find other people. You can follow other people or channels if you want to be notified when they upload new videos.

Man's greatest blunder has been in trying to make peace with the skies instead of making peace with his neighbors.

– Elbert Hubbard

3. Comment. To make use of Youtube as a social medium, start commenting on other people's videos, linking to them as your contacts, etc. (By now, if you've read the guidelines for the other social media, you'll know the drill. I won't re-write it all here.)
4. Embed. Youtube can be a great addition to your blog. If you want to create "vlogs" (video logs) in which you address your blog audience via video, or if you want to interview people who inspire you via Skype, you can upload the video to YouTube and then cut and paste the html code (click on "embed" on the video to find the code) into your blog post. You can even embed other people's videos in your post or on your site.

* * * *

Skype:

Once you've gotten to know people online (or if you already know them offline), Skype is a wonderful next step for deepening the relationship. If you find you have a lot in common with someone and want to grow the relationship and/or explore partnerships, invite them for a Skype chat and see what develops.

I have used Skype for many purposes. I've grown friendships through it, I've used it for online courses and coaching sessions, I've interviewed people on it and recorded the video for online use, I've invited people to be virtual guests in my classroom via Skype, and I've participated in women's circles on it.

For the basic package, Skype is free. The free service allows you to do one-on-one video chatting. You can do group calls, but if you want to incorporate video into your group call you need to pay for a subscription. You can also use Skype to make long distance calls to people's phone numbers, but you have to pay a minimal charge for that as well. (It's very inexpensive though, and I've found it to be a good way to cut down on long distance costs.)

Getting started on Skype.

1. Sign up. Creating a Skype profile is simple. I'd recommend including a photo so that if people who are searching for you see it they'll know they've found the right person. It's best to use

your real name, but if that's already taken (or if you'd rather be associated with your business brand), create some other username and then use your real name in your profile so that you can still be found.

2. Connect with people. Let people know your username, find out theirs and invite them to connect. Dial them up, and start conversing. You can use Skype as a chatroom, you can use sound and no video, or you can do video chats if you both have cameras.

There are many other sites that offer social media components for specific audiences. It would be difficult to create an exhaustive list, as it is now possible to for almost anyone to create a social media portion of their website. Here are some examples.

* * * *

Ning

On Ning, you can create your own social media tribe, or join others that already exist there. This is useful if you want to create groups where like-minded people share blog posts, links, conversations, etc. I've participated on Ning sites that are connected to conferences I've attended, communities of practice that I'm part of, and special interest groups.

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Food

If you're a foodie and love exchanging recipes, Food.com is place where you might want to spend some time. (Epicurious and Allrecipes offer similar features.) Find recipes you want to try, save them in your cookbooks, upload your own recipes (and relevant photos), share your favourites with friends, etc. To use the social media component, start commenting on the recipes, join groups, and start exploring.

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We cannot live only
for ourselves. A
thousand fibers
connect us with
our fellow men.
- Herman Melville

Foursquare

Share your location with your followers, hook up with people, become the mayor of whatever location you're at. (If I were on Foursquare, I would currently be the mayor of my local Starbucks, since that's where I'm writing from. Unless someone fought me for the title.)

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Ravelry

For knitters and other needlecraft enthusiasts.

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Tumblr

A micro-blogging site that has become popular with the teenagers in my house. Mostly they share photos, videos, and links they've found online. It seems to be a good way to keep it all in one place.

* * * *

Pinterest

Like a bulletin board or scrapbook where you collect the things you like online (photos, design ideas, videos, quotes, etc.) and share them on a create pin-board.

* * * *

Instagram

Share the photos you've taken on your Smartphone. It looks like fun, but I don't have a Smartphone.

* * * *

The good we
secure for
ourselves is
precarious and
uncertain until it is
secured for all of
us and
incorporated into
our common life.

– Jane Addams

LinkExpats

For expatriates, foreigners, international students, exchange visitors and travelers.

* * * *

Formspring

Where anyone can ask you anonymous questions. (A word of caution on this one: If you have teenagers, I would encourage you to monitor their use of Formspring as I have witnessed serious bullying happening as people can hide behind anonymous questions.)

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Others

The list of social media sites is growing even as I type. I couldn't possibly include them all here. For more, visit: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites or <http://traffikd.com/social-media-websites/>

My advice? Find the one(s) that appeals most to you, and try to ignore the rest. Don't spread yourself too thin, and don't turn your social media experiment into a dangerous addiction. Remember... it's a tool, not an alternative lifestyle. (If you want an alternative lifestyle, check out [Second Life](#). I'll leave that one to someone else to explain.)

Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.

– Jane Howard

The natural world is the larger sacred community to which we belong. To be alienated from this community is to become destitute in all that makes us human. To damage this community is to diminish our own existence.

– Thomas Berry

A FEW LAST WORDS ON MINDFULNESS

Being a mindful social media user means paying attention to whether you are abusing it or over-using it, how it affects you, when it is contributing to negative emotions, and when it is an unhealthy use of your time.

I urge you to make an intention of mindfulness. Social media is a great tool, but if the tool begins to shape your life, then IT has begun to use YOU instead of the other way around.

You'll recognize the warning signs in yourself when you are no longer being mindful. It might mean that checking your Twitter feed in the morning has become a priority over your meditation practice or your time with your kids. It might mean that you place too high a value on your online stats (readers, followers, clicks, etc.) and compare them to other people's stats. It might mean that you care too much about the opinions of others and spend a lot of time brewing over why nobody comments on your blog posts or Facebook status.

You are the only one who can judge how much social media is healthy for you and when it's time to walk away. Following are some tips that might help you, but there may be other solutions that work better for you personally.

It is not only for what we do that we are held responsible, but also for what we do not do.

– Moliere

1. Pay attention to how interactions with people make you feel. If following a popular person makes you feel jealous every time you see his/her name, then stop following and engage with people who make you feel good about yourself instead.
2. Be intentional about what you want to gain from your online connections. Though they can be very meaningful, don't expect them to replace the relationships/community you already have in your life. Leave your house and make friends that you can see face to face.
3. Make an intention about what times of day (and/or how much time each day) you'll allow yourself to spend time on social media. Perhaps you decide you won't go on until 10 a.m., or you'll only go on for 5 minutes each hour.
4. Be intentional about whether or not you'll allow yourself to visit social media sites on your smartphone. Make sure you have quiet time when you are not available. This may mean leaving your phone at home, or turning off the social media apps while you go for a walk or hang out with your kids.
5. When you're doing other work on the computer, close your internet browser and don't let yourself open it until you've completed a specific amount of work.
6. If your stats (followers, friends, readers, visits, etc.) impact the value you place on yourself, either be intentional about ignoring them, or step away from social media until you feel more healthy about it.
7. Take sabbaticals from social media. This may mean that one day a week you don't open your computer, or one week or month per year you step away. Savour the life you have away from the computer.
8. Make an intention to contribute to the good that is available online and to stay away from the bad. Don't get involved in ugly politics or hurtful rumours. Share positive stories that inspire instead of negative stories that cut people down.
9. Go outside. Be in nature. Disconnect from all electronics on a regular basis. Live in this beautiful space called earth. Take deep breaths and be mindful at all of the beauty around you.

Telling the truth
and finding out
you're not alone
changes
everything.

- Gloria Steinem

IN CLOSING

So there you are - you've been gently led into the water of social media. Can you do head bobs now? Perhaps tomorrow you'll be ready to tentatively lift your feet off the ground and paddle a few strokes.

Whatever you do, take this in your own time and don't let yourself be rushed by those people who think you're foolish for staying so long on the shore. Remember that social media is just that - a pool in which you can dip your toes in if you want and go for a swim in now and then, but you can always choose to get back out, dry yourself off and walk away.

When you're swimming, though, be sure to wave to me now and then. I'll be the friendly face bobbing up and down and smiling encouragement as you leave the shore.

You can find me here:

Twitter: [@heatherplett](#)

Facebook: [Heather Plett](#) or [Sophia Leadership](#)

Google+: [Heather Plett](#)

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