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Jonathan J. Swinton

Utah State University, jonathan.swinton@usu.edu

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Extension Needs Outreach Innovation Free from the Harms of Social Media

Abstract

Despite the outreach-building benefits of social media for Extension, it is time for Extension professionals to find new innovative ways to reach out that do not involve social media. An increasing body of research has demonstrated the harms social media use imparts on the health and well-being of those in our communities. Our future use of social media as a primary method of outreach may perpetuate these harms, requiring our best efforts to develop new methods of outreach that do not negatively affect those we serve.

Keywords: [social media](#), [outreach](#), [health](#), [well-being](#), [innovation](#)

Jonathan J. Swinton

Extension Assistant
Professor
Utah State University
Richfield, Utah
jonathan.swinton@usu.edu

Introduction

As Extension professionals face increased pressure to innovate programming and prove impact, creative means for outreach have been implemented (Meyer, Boyce, & Meyer, 2015; Wise, 2017; Zimbrot, 2019). Gharis, Bardon, Evans, Hubbard, and Taylor (2014) suggested that a primary means of outreach innovation for Extension professions is the use of social media. Much has been published regarding the benefits of using social media for Extension professionals (Allen, Jolly, & Barnes, 2016; Anbiah & Vijayalakshmi, 2017; Brinkman, Kinsey, & Henneman, 2017; Christensen, Hill, & Horrocks, 2015; Cornelisse et al., 2011; Davis & Stollar, 2019; Doyle & Briggeman, 2014; Ferree, 2015; Hill, 2014; Kinsey, 2010; LaRoe & Corrales, 2019; Newbury, Humphreys, & Fuess, 2014). However, the literature has failed to address many of the society-wide health-related problems associated with social media use that may be enabled or even encouraged if Extension continues to make social media a primary vehicle for outreach.

Social Media Use in Extension

A search of peer-reviewed literature for the past decade yielded many articles touting various beneficial uses of social media by Extension, including as a tool for marketing, outreach, and education; a means to improve communication among volunteers and Extension professionals; a way to stay in contact with 4-H

youths and their parents; an aid for fundraising efforts; and a channel for dissemination of information (Allen et al., 2016; Anbiah & Vijayalakshmi, 2017; Brinkman et al., 2017; Christensen et al., 2015; Cornelisse et al., 2011; Davis & Stollar, 2019; Doyle & Briggeman, 2014; Ferree, 2015; Hill, 2014; Kinsey, 2010; LaRoe & Corrales, 2019; Newbury et al., 2014). So much emphasis has been placed on social media in the literature and by Extension administrations that social media has become the darling of Extension professionals' outreach strategies.

Despite the many suggestions of potential beneficial uses of social media, little has been discussed regarding problems associated with such use. The limited literature on the topic speaks to logistical problems, negative impacts on Extension professionals themselves, issues surrounding compliance with university policies, and lack of sufficient knowledge of how to use social media among Extension personnel (Anbiah & Vijayalakshmi, 2017; Hill, 2014; Newbury et al., 2014).

A thorough search of the Extension-specific literature did not yield any peer-reviewed articles discussing the greater societal health and well-being concerns that have been found related to social media use. In addition, none discussed how the broad adoption of social media as a dissemination platform by Extension may contribute to or enable some of those societal health-related problems, which we as Extension professionals are employed to reduce.

Social Media Research and Well-Being

Extension professionals address a broad range of areas and needs. Many, like I, address issues of family and individual health and wellness. Issues of mental health, suicide, and divorce and other relationship problems have become areas of primary focus for many family and consumer sciences–focused and health and wellness–focused Extension professionals. Rarely does a week go by when I am not asked for advice, tools, presentations, or ideas to help address problems related to physical and mental health, suicide, relationships, and addictions.

Unfortunately, research has shown that social media use has negative impacts on all these areas. For example, social media use has been associated with poor current and future well-being, physical and mental health problems, suicide attempts, Internet addiction, cyberbullying, feelings of lack of connection to others, marital discord, infidelity, divorce, reduced life satisfaction, poor self-image, and increase in body mass index (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Clayton, 2014; Sedgwick, Epstein, Dutta, & Ougrin, 2019; Selfhout, Branje, Delsing, ter Bogt, & Meeus, 2009; Shakya & Christakis, 2017). We cannot ignore the negative impact that social media has on health and well-being.

Extension's Responsibility

We as Extension professionals have a mission to bring research-gained knowledge to the communities we serve (U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.). The Extension literature has indicated that our methods of outreach can be assisted by social media. However, research also has indicated that the same social media that may help our outreach methods is associated with a host of physical, mental, emotional, and relational problems in the lives of those we serve.

If we are encouraging the use of social media for a wide range of purposes related to the bringing of research-gained knowledge to the communities we serve, are we enabling the associated consequences

from social media use? Or worse, if we know that the research shows the detriments of social media use, are we being disingenuous in our mission by continuing to encourage its use?

As social media has advanced, we as Extension professionals have worked to find ways to implement its associated benefits for our communities. These efforts were not disingenuous in the beginning as we did not know of the negative side effects of social media use. However, we do now, and failure to respond to current research would be a failure of our mission.

Technology and social media have advanced faster than society has learned to deal with the collateral impacts (Albert, 2014; Park, 2017). I see this much like how society and even physicians praised certain benefits of smoking tobacco for quite some time before the many negative side effects from smoking had been discovered. Similarly, now that research related to social media has had some time to mature, the negative impacts of social media should raise the alarm for us as research experts in our communities.

New Innovative Strategies

Extension professionals have been counseled in some fairly recent publications that social media has become so dominant that its future importance and use is likely to increase and endure for a great deal of time (Davis & Dishon; 2017; Newbury et al., 2014; Parsons, 2015). Despite the encouragement in Extension literature to continue with the push of social media, Newbury et al. (2014) acknowledged that social media is not the "silver bullet for Extension outreach efforts" ("Discussion," para. 1). We can develop new strategies that meet the same goal.

In encouragement of social media use nearly a decade ago, Cornelisse et al. (2011) argued that "how the world communicates is changing and requires Extension to change as well" ("Summary," para. 1). This challenge was insightful then because those authors saw before many of us how social media could help our outreach. However, the research on the negative side effects of social media use was then in its infancy. That research has now matured, and it is time for us to again review the counsel from Cornelisse et al. (2011) with a warning and a challenge for change.

A Warning

The way we communicate has dramatically changed over the last decade, but not necessarily for the better. Face-to-face communication and social interactions are good for people. They improve mental and physical health, reduce marital problems, reduce suicide risk, improve addictions, and lower risk of mortality (Barnett & Gotlib, 1988; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Lewis & Rook, 1999; Peirce, Frone, Russell, Cooper, & Mudar, 2000; Sorkin, Rook, & Lu, 2002; Uchino, 2006; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996).

In contrast, interactions based on social media can cause the opposite to occur with all these issues (Shakya & Christakis, 2017). We should be fighting to improve mental and physical health, reduce marital problems, reduce suicide risk, improve addictions, and lower mortality risks. If there are changes we can make to reduce these potential negative impacts by reducing our communities' dependence on social media, we should make them.

A Challenge for Change

Change can be difficult, but is constant and inevitable (Lipchik, 2002). Many of us in Extension have spent the last decade warming to the changes that social media has posed for our work. Now, I am suggesting that we again change course. We need not abandon social media tomorrow. I also do not have the perfect answer for what could fill the outreach void left if we transition away from social media use. However, it is time for us as research experts to do our job and put the health and well-being of our communities above the conveniences provided by social media.

As I sit with my community members while they reel from another suicide, I feel the need to reflect. I teach the dangers of social media and its contributions to mental health problems and suicide to those I serve but hypocritically try to encourage them to spend more time on social media by finding, sharing, and expanding my Extension social media pages.

It is time for us as Extension professionals to change course and do it without social media. We are innovative. We are creative. We are entrepreneurial. And perhaps most important, we care deeply about those we serve. Let's use the capital from these powerful assets to come up with new innovative ways to market, reach out, communicate, and disseminate research to our communities. Let's ensure that Extension leads the way in paving a new innovative outreach future free from social media. The health and well-being of our communities depend on it.

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