

## Norwich Terriers, 8-16

Title: Social Media: Some Observations

Social interactions and networks have existed since the beginning of time. Social media computer applications are relatively new, although the technology itself has been around for many years. Yahoo Groups started in 1998, and the Bulletin Board System dates back to 1978. Twitter and Facebook have been publically available for a decade. What's new is the increased usage, largely driven by the popularity of mobile devices. For better or worse, social media connections are more visible than ever. I was an early adopter, joining Facebook and various groups years ago, and more recently dropping out. All of my social media networks were related to dog breeding, dog clubs, or dogs in some way. In this column, I share some of my own observations of social media.

Shared cyber-spaces enable collective contributions, evoking an idealized environment for dialogue. Consider this enticing invitation page: "Welcome to *Yahoo Groups*. An extension to your real life *group* of friends, interests and communities." In fact, my social media connections had little to do with my real life social network. Perhaps that's one reason I found it to be a rather shallow waste of time. I accepted lots of FB "friend" requests over the years from people that I've never even met – the only common thread relating to dogs.

On the other hand, I enjoy reading the research about trends in social media usage, and I am intrigued by the social mechanisms at play – the sorts of questions probably best left to social psychologists to answer. Observing and, to a lesser extent, participating in dog club social media forums, it's apparent that people manage their online interactions quite clearly different from face-to-face interactions. This is due in part to the technology behind online social networks. For example, online interactions are emergent and episodic. Relationships between users on social media often reflect a mixture of positive and negative interactions. Healthy in-person discussions may include controversy and disagreement, but there is an immediate opportunity to clarify a viewpoint or settle differences. Online interactions with negative interpretations are more likely to harbor antagonism. It's really not surprising that negative interactions are so prolific. The social media platform provides a level of pseudo-anonymity, and perhaps to some people a feeling of disinhibition. Simply put, these characteristics of social media enable individuals to hide behind their computer and hurl insults – insults I doubt they would dare say in a face-to-face exchange.

Social media networks often include an audience who inhabit the margins of debates. For some third-party spectators, there is nothing more entertaining than Internet fights. These online non-participants are commonly referred to as "lurkers", a pejorative term for those present in public online spaces but not speaking up. In some forums, non-participants are cast as freeloaders of the online community who offer nothing and may even be removed by the owner/moderator. According to some older studies, lurkers constitute about 90% of online communities. I was generally a lurker and would argue that lurkers do contribute – they listen. Although listening is not a common metaphor for social media activity, non-participants act as gathered audience of sorts, neither agreeing nor disagreeing but listening, however distractedly. As such non-participants contribute to a mode of receptiveness that encourages others to make public contributions. Perhaps it is the illusion of an audience that is seductive to participants. For me, social media was in the background, a steady stream of messages that I might briefly focus on, if at all. I suspect that this sort of diffuse engagement is typical. Other factors contribute to

spectating/lurking. When negative messages are accentuated or the players are cliquy, dialogue is not encouraged.

The addictive nature of social media has been well-documented. I'm not sure the attraction; perhaps being able to see other people reacting to things at the same time you are, of not being alone. As we create a digitally networked world around ourselves, our attention and distraction is being pushed to new limits. Social media is still young and habituated patterns of use and disciplinary norms are being established: where and when to access, who to follow or friend, and how to respond to messages. For, now I'm mostly offline and don't miss it. I simply don't have time. While social media interactions may be beneficial for many people, the big beneficiaries are the sites themselves; Facebook, Twitter, Amazon benefit the most by exploiting the massive archive of information about individuals and their interactions. That's another reason I left, the advertisements.

My involvement with social media includes some really positive experiences too. I joined several groups devoted to dog topics, such as canine reproduction, nutrition, food allergies, etc. By searching on key words within these sites, all sorts of timely and useful tips were available on things like dosage for worming preparations, whelping difficulties, and care of newborns. Members were also responsive, helping each other in emergencies.

We live in a world of social networks and exchanges formed by people connecting with others — we always have. I'm not convinced that social media has made our lives better, but like the cell phone, its diffusion has been remarkable and social media will likely continue to innovate to meet the needs of its users.

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