

THE **SOCIAL DISASTER**



WARNING!

**SOCIAL MEDIA MAY BE HAZARDOUS
TO YOUR LIFE, YOUR KIDS & SOCIETY**

LORENZO BANK

*Sammi Seven Publishing
Las Vegas, Nevada*

The Social Disaster by Lorenzo Bank

www.TheSocialDisaster.com

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**To my Mother, Helen, who has been
my lifelong inspiration.**

I Love You, Hel, and I always will.

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FOREWORD

Informed Consent

If you were going to have surgery, your doctor would be obligated to make you aware of all the potential risks and harms that could result from having the procedure. Referred to as “Informed Consent,” this fundamental legal and ethical principle is designed to ensure that patients can make well-considered decisions about their care, with full knowledge of the risks. Once you’re given all the relevant information, you assume the risk if you decide to go forward.

When it comes to social media, users are engaging with potentially harmful platforms without knowledge of the inherent risks, i.e. without Informed Consent. They are largely unaware that these platforms are wired to dominate their time and attention, psychologically exploit them and sow the seeds of digital addiction. They are unaware of all the different types of harm that are associated with their usage, from grave mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, isolation and low self-esteem, as well as practical side effects threatening cognition, memory, communication and decision-making. Not

only is there no warning label, there is no Informed Consent and, therefore, no assumption of the risk.

THE SOCIAL DISASTER

The goal of this book is to be that Social Media Warning Label and a source of Informed Consent for you and yours. Given how hectic and stressed so many people's lives are, it's completely understandable that you don't have the time to research, analyze and organize hundreds of studies, surveys and statistics as well as a myriad of societal, cultural and legal issues to truly understand this relatively new phenomenon and its impact on users. And so much new and damning information has come out in just the last few years that you wouldn't have the full picture unless you engaged in all that research very recently.

The good news is you don't have to. As a former attorney with a Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology, I've spent countless hours researching and analyzing the best available information, then presenting it in a user-friendly format for readers to digest and get the greatest benefit from.

The Social Disaster is organized in such a way that you can read it sequentially, or jump to whatever chapters and sections you find most relevant or intriguing, and read the others as you see fit. We'll start with social media addiction and the mental health challenges associated with platform usage. Then we'll focus on the effect on the most vulnerable, teens and adolescents, as well as the very difficult topics of suicide and self-harm. There are also many non-psychological harms associated with these platforms, labeled on these pages as "practical side effects," that are important for you to be aware of, including how they can negatively impact academic and work performance, career, personal and intimate relationships, and even

land you in court. The later chapters of the book delve into cancel culture and societal division, as well as an analysis of social media's value as a source of news and information. To make that determination, we'll explore the volume of fake news and misinformation that appear on the platforms, how quickly it spreads far and wide and the related, uncured problem of fake profiles and automated bots. Then we'll explore the social media industry's increasingly aggressive and rampant censorship, assessing their decision-making and corresponding newsworthiness related to COVID-19, given the gravity of lives being on the line and the impact of the novel virus on all our lives.

I sincerely believe that it is critically important for you to be able to process and consider the information in this book without emotional diversion. As a result, I made a conscious editorial choice to leave the political issues to the endless list of other books that focus on them. No mentions of anyone named Trump or Biden, no laptops, election issues or the like. While the intense societal division that has become our collective reality, often driven and exacerbated by social media, leaves many with the impression that everything is political, everything is not. Addiction, mental health and cognitive issues that all conspire to threaten relationships, success and happiness simply do not care about their victims' politics. They are equal opportunity destroyers.

To be honest, writing this book wasn't my initial intention. I started down this path as I became more and more curious about the effect social media is having on individuals and society in general. We seemed more intensely divided than ever, cancel culture was metastasizing with alarming speed and freedom of expression was under attack. That wasn't the social media I'd signed up for. Friends that quit using these platforms told me that they were happier, more productive and didn't miss it at all. I started to question whether social media was a net negative or positive and how trivial or vast

the harms associated with these platforms really are. So I decided to invest “some time” to answer my own questions.

“Some time” quickly morphed into full-time, then overtime. The more I researched and learned, the more shocked I became as my curiosity gave way to intense revelation. Once I gained a true understanding of just how pervasive and potentially harmful these platforms are to users, families and society at large, I became committed to writing this book and sharing the information with the goal of educating others so they can make informed decisions about social media. After all, it’s not like it comes with a warning label.

CHAPTER 1

To Post Or Not To Post, That Is The Question

The social media experiment has failed. Not for the tech giants who developed these platforms. It's worked out beyond their wildest dreams. But the tale of the tape tells a very different story for you, your family and our collective society. That's not surprising. Addiction always works out worse for the user than the supplier.

Yes, addiction.

Executives and insiders from some of the biggest social media companies in the industry have openly and publicly revealed that these platforms are designed to psychologically manipulate you, tap into your cognitive biases, serve you frequent doses of dopamine and get you hooked. Their goal is to monopolize as much of your time and attention as possible because that's how they monetize their product and drive up profits. Many won't even use the platforms themselves or let their children near them, so why would they be good for you and your family?

“My solution is that I just don’t use these tools anymore. I can control my decision, which is that I don’t use that shit. I can control my kids’ decisions, which is that they’re not allowed to use that shit...The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works.”¹

CHAMATH PALIHAPITIYA,

Former Facebook Vice President of User Growth

Like Michael Corleone said in *The Godfather*, “It’s not personal, Sonny. It’s strictly business.”

Like any addiction, however, there are consequences.

THE BAD, THE UGLY & THE GOOD

Personal Consequences

On a personal level, social media use is associated with serious mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, loneliness, withdrawal and low self-esteem in scores of clinical studies and surveys. Years of data tell us that using these platforms, and engaging in the multi-tasking central to them, can also have harmful, practical side effects that affect academic performance and career success as well as personal and intimate relationships. Cognitive abilities, focus, memory, communication, decision-making and more are all potentially compromised. While all these issues can significantly affect adult users, the most vulnerable among us, society’s youth, suffer even more dramatically.

Societal Consequences

On a societal level, these platforms are a major cause of deep, intense division. Teams of tech wizards behind the curtain rig their algorithms to overload you with content that plays to your natural confirmation biases, telling you more and more of what they know you want to hear, so you'll stay on the platform longer. This fosters more division as the belief that those with opinions different from yours must be radical, ignorant or inherently bad people.

*"I thought once everybody could speak freely and exchange information and ideas, the world is automatically going to be a better place. I was wrong about that."*²

EVAN WILLIAMS,

Co-Founder & Former CEO, Twitter

We've also seen that when people are given a worldwide audience and the ability to sit behind their keyboard, often anonymously, and impulsively post whatever comes to mind, they tend to be less kind and thoughtful, often revealing the worst version of themselves. This toxic combination of intolerance of different views and impulsive aggression that can be shared and rocketed around platforms in a nanosecond contributes to uniquely intense and widespread levels of cyberbullying, peer pressure and emotional havoc. Social platforms have also become the home of one of the more divisive societal constructs we've ever seen...cancel culture. While social media started out and gained popularity because it gave a voice to the voiceless, cancellations have the exact opposite effect, amplifying outrage, ruining careers and lives, and leading to self-censorship.

Misinformation, Fake News and Censorship

Adding to the intense, growing division are the hundreds of millions of fake accounts and automated “bots” proliferating and sharing rampant misinformation and false news on the platforms. While fake information is being spread, the social media overlords are simultaneously and aggressively censoring people that you might want to hear from, who may have the most accurate information and opinions, even if they didn’t follow the preferred narrative. Simply put, these platforms are not trustworthy sources of news and information. As you’ll read in Chapter 13: *Big Social Censorship*, there is no better example of this failure than their silencing of critical COVID-19 information, and credible medical and scientific opinions, while lives hung in the balance. If they think it appropriate to restrict access to potentially life-saving information, about which they have no personal expertise or background, what wouldn’t they censor? The answer is simple. Nothing.

Positive Aspects of Social Media

Of course, there are positive aspects to social media. To say otherwise we’d have to assume the almost three billion people on Facebook are masochistic gluttons for punishment, and that’s certainly not the case. Potential benefits of platform use include staying connected to friends or making new ones, interacting with people with shared hobbies, activities or interests and having a vehicle to express oneself. If you’re on the platforms or have been in the past, you’ve already established what those positives are for yourself. The question is whether they outweigh the risk of harm presented by the many psychological and practical side effects associated with social media, risks that most users have no idea that they are taking each time they log in to their favorite platform.

To be clear, this book is written primarily for the 99.999% of users that are on social media for personal, not commercial, reasons. I recognize that social engagement may directly impact someone's career and that these platforms can be great ways for businesses and people to market their products and services. A content creator on YouTube, a journalist who tweets out links to their articles or a celebrity whose following can translate into greater success at the box office. But even then, how much these "commercial users" engage for business versus personal reasons is an important distinction. The more they engage non-commercially, the greater their risk of saying the wrong thing and getting cancelled, censored or deplatformed, thereby harming their commercial interests. Awareness and analysis of the negative side effects and risks of platform use is just as important for them to consider in terms of how they will approach their usage as the non-commercial user, maybe even more so.

YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA WARNING LABEL

Most objects of addiction and things that can cause you harm come with some type of warning label. Social media platforms don't, but they should.

"I think that you do it exactly the same way that you regulated the cigarette industry. Here's a product: Cigarettes. They're addictive, they're not good for you. I think that for sure, technology has addictive qualities that we have to address, and that product designers are working to make those products more addictive and we need to rein that back."³

MARC BENIOFF,

Salesforce.com CEO

A decade has passed since the majority of social media's heavy hitters hit the market and Facebook isn't too far away from celebrating the two-decade mark. With the benefit of time, we now have hundreds of clinical studies, surveys and statistics that provide insight into the potential psychological and practical risks and harms that these platforms pose to individual users and society as a whole. Social media executives and insiders are well aware of these risks. Perhaps that's why many of them won't use the platforms themselves or let their children near them. You should know about these risks too and have the same opportunity to make an informed decision for you and your children.

The social media industry isn't going to voluntarily institute any meaningful change and kill the golden goose, or slap that warning label on their product. And legislators who can't agree on what day it is aren't likely to come together to meaningfully force or "motivate" them to do so.

That puts the responsibility and decision-making power in one person's hands...yours.

Whether you will use social media personally, and, if you're a parent, allow your children to do so, is a critically important decision. Every decision we make comes down to putting all the positives on one side of the scale, all the negatives on the other side, weighing them out and deciding which side wins.

Ultimately, you have three potential "solutions" at your disposal. Delete your social media accounts, set restrictions and parameters on your usage, or change nothing. The only way to make an informed decision is to be aware of and consider the studies, data and issues relevant to social media usage...psychological and practical side effects, societal division, cancel culture and whether these platforms are credible sources of news and information. The problem is that a

vast majority of social media users have no idea of the substantial, shocking body of evidence that is now available regarding all these critical issues. They're simply unaware of the risks they are taking. Giving you access to that information is exactly what our shared journey through this book is all about. The rest is up to you.

CHAPTER 2

Don't Hate The Players, Understand The Game

You've probably never heard of Bolt. The now defunct social networking and video website launched in 1996 and gave users the opportunity to create profiles, communicate in chat rooms and on message boards and participate in online quizzes and polls. While Bolt failed to achieve widespread and lasting adoption, it succeeded in securing a unique place in tech history as the very first social media platform.

Fast forward to February 4, 2004 and the most successful social media site of all time, TheFacebook, (yes, it was originally called TheFacebook), launched from Mark Zuckerberg's Harvard dorm room and the rest, as the saying goes, is history. Facebook currently boasts over 2.8 billion active users.¹ To put that in perspective, if Facebook were a country, its population would be eight times that of the United States. Unlike Bolt, Facebook's adoption is astounding. 69% of all adults in the United States are currently on the platform, with 71% checking it at least once per day.²

The failure of Bolt juxtaposed against the generational success of Facebook begs the question...why? Why did one succeed so wildly while the other, armed with the advantage of being first to market, fizzled out and disappeared? It would be easy to say that Facebook did it better. That much is obvious. But it's not that simple. They didn't just do it better, they did it different.

While one was designed to get people connected, the other was designed to get people addicted.

*"The thought process that went into building these applications...Facebook being the first of them to really understand it... that thought process was all about how do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible. And that means that we need to sort of give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever. And that's gonna get you to contribute more content and that's gonna get you, you know more likes and comments. It's a social validation feedback loop...I mean It's exactly that kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with because you're exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology. I think that...you know, the inventors, creators uh you know, and it's me, it's Mark it's the you know, Kevin Systrom at Instagram.... It's all of these people...um, understood this consciously and we did it anyway."*³

SEAN PARKER,

Former President, Facebook

“So we want to psychologically figure out how to manipulate you as fast as possible and then give you back that dopamine hit. We did that brilliantly at Facebook. Instagram has done it. WhatsApp has done it. Snapchat has done it. Twitter has done it.”⁴

CHAMATH PALIHAPITIYA,

Former Facebook VP of User Growth

“The business model is built on the idea that people use this product over and over and over again for a very long period of time. And the way that they get people to do that is they built addictive News Feeds that suck you in and make you want to keep scrolling, keep looking, keep liking, keep clicking.”⁵

SANDY PARAKILAS,

Former Facebook Platform Operations Manager, Chief Strategy Officer for the Center for Humane Technology

“We’ve moved away from having a tools based technology environment to an addiction and manipulation based technology environment. That’s what’s changed. Social media isn’t a tool that’s just waiting to be used. It has its own goals and its own means of pursuing them by using your psychology against you. We were not evolved to have social approval dosed to us every five minutes.”⁶

TRISTAN HARRIS, FORMER

Design Ethicist at Google, Co-Founder & President of the Center for Humane Technology

THE BARBARIANS AREN'T AT THE GATE...THEY'RE ALREADY IN YOUR HOUSE AND ON YOUR PHONE

While Facebook may have been the first to really “psychologically figure out how to manipulate you,” many other social media platforms have learned these lessons well and followed in its footsteps. Video-sharing platform YouTube launched in 2005, was sold to Google in 2006, and became the second-most popular website in the world behind its owner by 2020. YouTube’s usage statistics are staggering, with more than 500 hours of video uploaded to the site every minute, and over one billion hours of content watched on the platform every day.⁷ Twitter starting teaching people to express themselves in 140 characters or less when they launched in 2006, and exploded to 500 million tweets per day being sent on the platform in just eight short years.⁸ That’s approximately 6,000 tweets per second and 347,000 tweets per minute, every minute of every day, 365 days per year.

Photo-centric platforms Instagram (purchased by Facebook in 2012) and Pinterest were launched in 2010, followed by Snapchat in 2011. In just a decade, Pinterest users have placed 200 billion Pins,⁹ while over 95 million photos are posted to Instagram every day, an average of over 1,000 per second.¹⁰ Snapchat clocks in with 4 billion Snaps per day, and an average of 10 billion daily video views.¹¹ Youth-driven video platform TikTok challenged users to entertain and express in 15-second videos...first in China in 2016, then globally in 2017...and quickly became the most downloaded app worldwide in 2020 with over 800 million downloads.¹² U.S. TikTokers averaged over 14 hours per month on the platform as of March 2020, almost doubling from just over seven hours per month only five months before.¹³

When we look at the social media industry as a whole, it’s impossible to argue that the addiction model isn’t working. Statista.com (“Statista”) estimates there are over 225 million social media users in the United States and 3.78 billion worldwide.¹⁴ The percentage of the

U.S. population with a social media profile has exploded from 10% in 2008 to 82% in 2021,¹⁵ with worldwide penetration now over 48%.¹⁶ As of January 2021, the top 17 social media platforms have over 16 billion active accounts,¹⁷ equating to over two social media accounts for every living human being on the face of the earth.

UNDERSTANDING THE GAME: YOUR TIME EQUALS THEIR MONEY

In order to understand the game, you first have to understand how the game has changed. The early days of tech saw the titans of Silicon Valley make money by creating and selling hardware and software to consumers and businesses. The simple exchange of products for money. With the explosion of the internet came the digital information monetization age, where massive revenues were generated through selling information of all types online. But as anyone who has been online in the last decade can tell you, virtually any information you'd want to purchase online can be accessed somewhere else, in some form, for free.

Dr. Bernardo Huberman, former Director of Hewlett Packard's Social Computing Labs and Consulting Professor at Stanford University, spent years researching internet growth and usage patterns and shared this insightful analysis in 2010:

"Because information is so easily available...the web, search engines and so on....it has lost its value. No one really pays for information any longer. So the only thing that is valuable in life is what is scarce and what is scarce is attention. The ability that we have to devote our mental capacity and our eyes and so on to something that is happening in front of us. And that is limited and therefore,

very valuable...This whole idea of having a new scarce commodity called attention shifts now the focus of our own research to how is it that people attend to things. Attention is a limited resource. We cannot produce more attention. It will be forever limited.”¹⁸

“What is people’s motivation when they upload content and share? We are attention machines, we constantly crave attention. People will give attention to content regardless of the quality of the content. People are attracted to popularity. They are interested in what is popular and that is often independent of the quality of the content.”¹⁹

The social media industry crafted platforms that simultaneously serve both ends of the attention equation highlighted by Dr. Huberman. By playing to the basic human desire for attention, they can hold your attention for longer periods of time and have you checking in more frequently. Greater time, multiplied by ever increasing numbers of visits, equals the greatest opportunity to maximize profits. How? By selling your “attention” to advertisers. Like the old saying goes, “if you aren’t paying for the product, you are the product.”

“When you think about how some of these companies work, it starts to make sense. There are all these services on the Internet that we think of as free, but they’re not free. They’re paid for by advertisers. Why do advertisers pay those companies? They pay in exchange for showing their ads to us. We’re the product. Our attention is the product being sold to advertisers.”²⁰

JUSTIN ROSENSTEIN,

*Former Engineering Lead at Facebook,
Former Project Manager at Google*

By tracking, recording and analyzing every action you take, every prompt you react to, every link you click on, everything you “Like”, share or comment on, every video you watch or image you view and the time you spend viewing them, sophisticated artificial intelligence programs embedded into these platforms are gathering data on your behaviors and preferences. Every piece of data collected from and about you, including your personal sign-up information, is continually used to help them figure out how to keep you engaged for longer periods of time and coming back for more, thereby monetizing your usage and maximizing their profits.

Simply put, your time equals their money.

When you’re getting lost in YouTube videos or how many “Likes” your latest post received, it’s easy to forget that every major social media company is a for-profit business, with most being publicly traded and responsible to their shareholders. In some respects, social media companies are no different than any other business. What business doesn’t want the most traffic and the greatest number of customers at their establishment for the longest period of time, whether a physical store or virtual marketplace, so they can maximize their revenue?

But there are also glaring differences. Other industries and businesses aren’t psychologically addictive and don’t cause the human brain to react in ways similar to exposure to cocaine, alcohol, cigarettes and gambling. Other businesses aren’t intimately associated with depression, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, low self-esteem and narcissism. Other businesses don’t reduce your ability to learn and process new information, multi-task, and stay focused. Other businesses don’t lower your levels of working and long-term memory, impair your decision-making abilities and hinder your communication skills. Other businesses don’t potentially wreak havoc on your

academic and work performance as well as your ability to maintain healthy personal and romantic relationships. Other businesses aren't a breeding ground for bullying and cancel culture. And no other business has led to more societal discord, division, and even outright hate, than these unique platforms. None.

THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

"When we were making the like button, our entire motivation was, 'Can we spread positivity and love in the world?' The idea that, fast-forward to today, and teens would be getting depressed when they don't have enough likes, or it could be leading to political polarization was nowhere on our radar."²¹

JUSTIN ROSENSTEIN,

Co-inventor of the Facebook "Like" button

"There were meaningful, systemic changes happening around the world because of these platforms that were positive! I think we were naive about the flip side of that coin."²²

TIM KENDALL,

Former President of Pinterest, Former Facebook Director of Monetization

I'm not going to suggest that all the innovators of social media are bad or ethically suspect people who simply didn't care about what they were unleashing on the world when they created this unique marriage of mass technology and psychological manipulation. I'm sure that some recognized that there was a dark side to what they were doing and forged ahead anyway, while others had good

intentions and thought they were doing something entirely positive. The idea that anyone could have truly foreseen the depths of harm that these technologies and platforms have brought on users of all ages, as well as society at large, would require Nostradamus to have his best day in the prediction business.

But with study after study revealing the potential side effects of this unique industry, these companies have either chosen to live in a consistent state of denial, user harm be damned, or they've lost control of the platforms they created. If it's the former, there's a good reason why.

Money.

"These things, you release them, and they take on a life of their own. And how they're used is pretty different than how you expected. You can't, in practice, put the genie back in the bottle. You can make some tweaks, but at the end of the day, you've gotta grow revenue and usage, quarter over quarter. It's... The bigger it gets, the harder it is for anyone to change."²³

ALEX ROETTER,

Former Senior VP of Engineering at Twitter

Or maybe, as Mr. Roetter suggests, if you listen to insiders familiar with the sophistication and breadth of artificial intelligence that has already been put in place, one has to wonder if, and how, these companies could put the toothpaste back in the tube. Or, is the technology and algorithmic design so deeply and irreparably infected that they'd have to put it out of its misery and start over?

"There's only a few people who understand how those systems work, and even they don't necessarily fully

*understand what's gonna happen with a particular piece of content. So, as humans, we've almost lost control over these systems...they're controlling us more than we're controlling them."*²⁴

*"We've built a system that we don't fully understand. And that system is addicting humans so it is effectively controlling us."*²⁵

*"What's not okay is when there's no regulation, no rules, and no competition, and the companies are acting as sort of de facto governments. And then they're saying, "Well, we can regulate ourselves." I mean, that's just a lie. That's just ridiculous. The phone company has tons of sensitive data about you, and we have a lot of laws that make sure they don't do the wrong things. We have almost no laws around digital privacy, for example."*²⁶

SANDY PARAKILAS,

Former Facebook Platform Operations Manager, Chief Strategy Officer for the Center for Humane Technology

But nothing will be scrapped or substantially changed and no impactful self-regulation will happen. Multi-billion dollar industries don't voluntarily abandon immensely successful profit strategies. Politicians are in a perpetual state of ideological disagreement and are often driven by contributions and self-interest, so waiting for them to pass legislation that would meaningfully minimize user and societal harm is an exercise in futility. They are notoriously slow to act and historically divided. And who gets to decide what the best changes would be for all concerned, not one "side" or the other? In a race between a voluntary industry solution, a political intervention and spotting Bigfoot riding a unicorn through your living room, bet the house on Bigfoot.

SOLUTION FOCUSED

“Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past. Let us accept our own responsibility for the future.”

JOHN F. KENNEDY

While we can be sure that JFK never intended that quote to show up in a book on social media, his suggestion is a good one. Let’s leave the past where it belongs. At the end of the day, who cares? If Mother Theresa invented cigarettes you still shouldn’t smoke them and if the devil invented seat belts it’s still a good idea to buckle up when you drive. Assessing the motives and intentions of the innovators who created these platforms, or the methods and tactics they use to keep users coming back for another dopamine hit, isn’t going to change or fix anything. Focusing on solutions going forward is infinitely more important and productive than focusing on blame for the past. The decision-making power and responsibility for your own well-being sits exactly where it should, in your hands.

Now that you understand the battle that is taking place for your time and attention every time you visit a social platform, let’s answer a critical question. Is Social Media Addiction (a) a real thing, or (b) just a catchy chapter title? Numerous clinical studies and shocking neurological and psychological analogies to highly addictive substances say (a) is the right answer. Let’s go to Chapter 3: *Social Media Addiction*.