

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



Heather Plett is a dreamer, wanderer, writer, teacher, leadership mentor, edge-walker, and community-dweller. She is passionate about helping people discover their own voices, stories, and leadership potential. She teaches communication, writing, leadership, and facilitation through the local university and through her own workshops and courses. She blogs at www.sophialeadership.com. Her 15 minutes of fame was when she was named Manitoba's Communicator of the Year in 2009. Follow her twitter stream [@heatherplett](https://twitter.com/heatherplett)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
What the Heck is Social Media?	9
My History in Social Media	11
Why should you be on Social Media?	14
On the other hand... The Pitfalls	17
My Approach to Social Media	20
Before you Wade too Far into the Waters	23
Guidelines for Online Engagement	25
Social Media Platforms (an overview)	27
Blogs	27
Twitter	30
Facebook	33
LinkedIn	37
Google+	39
Flickr	40
Youtube	42
Skype	43
Others	44
A Few Last Words on Mindfulness	47
In Closing	49

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

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

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.

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 endued 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).

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

— Sir Ken Robinson

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.

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

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.

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.