

Former Meta Facebook official's 'explosive' memoir about the corrupt social media giant

By Hillel Italie

NEW YORK (AP) — An insider account being billed as an “explosive dispatch” about “seven critical years” at Facebook/ [Meta](#) will be published next week.

Flatiron Books announced Wednesday that “Careless People” is scheduled for Tuesday. The memoir is written by Meta’s former director of global public policy, Sarah Wynn-Williams, who left what was then Facebook in 2018.

“‘Careless People’ takes readers inside Meta’s board rooms, private jets, and meetings with heads of state, revealing the appetites, excesses, blind spots, and priorities of executives [Mark Zuckerberg](#), [Sheryl Sandberg](#), and Joel Kaplan,” the publisher’s announcement reads in part. “Wynn-Williams paints a portrait of this group as profoundly flawed, self-interested, and careless human beings, callously indifferent to the price others would pay for their own enrichment.”

A couple of years ago, a friend matter-of-factly dismissed the research findings that led to my new book on the psychology of social networks, [Facebuddha](#). She said “[social media](#) is here to stay.” Indeed, social media has attained such a ubiquitous, overwhelming presence and power in society that it seems unthinkable that we could ever exorcise it from our lives.

But that’s exactly what I’m suggesting we do. And I’m not alone. Even former Facebook insiders are raising red flags about the world’s largest [social network](#).

Facebook's former vice president for user growth, Chamath Palihapitiya, recently said "we have created tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works," and advised people to take a "hard break" from social media. His comments echoed those of Facebook founding president Sean Parker, who said social media provides a “social validation feedback loop (‘a little [dopamine](#) hit...because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post’) that’s exactly the thing a hacker like myself would come up with because you’re exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology.” This parallels what Tristan Harris said and I echoed in a recent Pacific Heart post – that social media is a “race to the bottom of the brainstem.”

Are these fears overblown? What is social media doing to us as individuals and as a society? Since over 70% of American teens and adults are on Facebook and over 1.2 billion users visit the site daily—with the average person spending over 90 minutes a day on all social media platforms combined—it’s vital that we gain [wisdom](#) about the social media genie, because it’s true – it’s not going back into the bottle without our [mindful](#) effort. Our wish to connect with others and express ourselves come with unwanted side effects. Social media may in fact be leading us away from the belonging we sought in the first place.

The problems with social media

Social media is, of course, far from being all bad. There are often tangible benefits that follow from social media use. Honest online self-presentation [can enhance](#) feelings of wellbeing and perceived online social support, at least in the short term. Facebook communities [can help](#) break down the [stigma](#) and negative stereotypes of illness, while social media, in general, [can “serve as a spring board”](#) for the “more reclusive...into greater social integration.” We can keep in touch across geographical distance and connect with dispersed interest groups. There have been times that social media has been important for my own connection to an Asian American community. I have friends with illness who get significant support from their Facebook posts.

But Parker and Palihapitiya are onto something when they talk about the addictive and socially corrosive qualities of social media. Facebook “addiction” (yes, there’s a [scale](#) for this) looks similar [on MRI scan](#) in some ways to [substance abuse](#) and gambling addictions (specifically in [amygdala-striatal activation](#)). Some users even go to extremes to chase the highs of likes and followers. Twenty-six-year-old Wu Yongning recently [fell to his death](#) in pursuit of selfies precariously taken atop skyscrapers.

Facebook can also exacerbate social [envy](#), as illustrated in [Psychology Today’s November/December 2017 cover story on online social comparison](#). Envy is nothing if not corrosive of the social fabric, turning [friendship](#) into rivalry, hostility and grudges. The medium is the message, and social media tugs at us to view each other’s “highlight reels,” and all too often, we feel ourselves lacking by comparison. This can be fuel for personal growth, if we can turn envy into admiration, inspiration and self-compassion; but it’s often cause for dissatisfaction with oneself and others.

Many do feel dissatisfied after spending time on Facebook. A [study](#) by Kross and colleagues published in 2013 showed quite definitively that the more time young adults spent on Facebook, the worse off they felt. Subjects were texted five times daily for two weeks to answer questions about well-being, direct social contact, and Facebook use. Those who spent more time on Facebook felt significantly worse later on, supporting a causal connection. The effect was small but significant, even after controlling for factors such as [depression](#) and [loneliness](#).

Interestingly, those spending significant time on Facebook, but also reporting moderate or high levels of direct social contact, still reported worsening wellbeing. The authors hypothesized that comparisons and emotions triggered by Facebook were carried into real-world contacts, perhaps damaging the healing power of real-world relationships.

More recently, Holly Shakya and Nicholas Christakis [studied](#) 5,208 adult Facebook users over two years, measuring life satisfaction and mental and physical health over time. All measures were worse with Facebook use, suggesting a causal link. This link depended only on the quantity of Facebook use, not the quality of use (i.e. passive or active use, liking, clicking or posting). The researchers concluded “exposure to the carefully curated images from others’ lives leads to negative self-comparison, and the sheer quantity of social media interaction may detract from more meaningful real-life experiences.” This conclusion rebuts the assertion of others that “active” use is beneficial while “passive” use harms.

Mark Zuckerberg recently said he wanted to make Facebook a “force for good.” To do so, he’s changing the news feed to serve us up more of our Facebook friends and less news. But research suggests that viewing our friends’ posts can actually worsen our mental health. As I wrote recently, [“Mr. Zuckerberg, Tear Down This Wall!”](#)

How to rein in your use of social media

So, what can we do to manage the downsides of social media? One idea is to log out of Facebook completely and take that “hard break.” Researcher Morten Tromholt of Denmark [found](#) that after taking a one week break from Facebook, an experimental group had higher life satisfaction and positive emotions. The effect was especially pronounced for “heavy Facebook users, passive Facebook users and users who tend to envy others on Facebook.”

We can also become more mindful and curious about social media’s effects on our minds, hearts and relationships, weighing the good and bad. We should ask ourselves how social media makes us feel or behave and decide whether we need to limit our exposure to social media altogether (by logout or deactivation) or simply modify our social media environment. Some people I’ve spoken with find ways of cleaning up their news feeds—from hiding everyone but their closest friends to “liking” only reputable news, information, and entertainment sources. Some even hide everyone altogether, eliminating the news feed entirely.

Knowing how social media affects our relationships, we might limit social media interactions to those that support real-world relationships. Instead of lurking or passively scrolling through a never-ending bevy of posts, we can stop to ask ourselves important questions, like, *What are my intentions?* and *What is this online realm doing to me and my relationships?*

As I answered my friend, “social media may be here to stay – but you have to decide for yourself whether or not you’ll stay on it, and if so, how.” Though the genie is out of the bottle, we may find, as Shakya and Christakis put it, “online social interactions are no substitute for the real thing,” and that in-person, healthy relationships are vital to society and our own individual wellbeing. We would do well to remember that truth and not put all our eggs in the social media basket. We would do well not to blindly follow the social media siren, which while promising connection and democratization, actually degrades well-being, makes us more opinionated and less related, empowers and enriches a few, monetizes our relationships and strips away our privacy.

Facebook is here to stay. Until it becomes MySpace. We could all remember the power and potential of the IRL. Relationship, caring and nurturance have driven our evolution as a species. We modify them at our peril.

My tips for a Social Media Detox are at the [Facebuddha Mindfulness Challenge](#).

A version of this article appeared at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, as "[How to Use Social Media Wisely and Mindfully](#)," and is adapted from [Facebuddha: Transcendence in the Age of Social Networks](#). Thanks to Jill Suttie and Kira Newman of the GGSC for helping with the original edits.

According to Flatiron, Wynn-Williams will describe in detail Zuckerberg’s efforts to allow Meta in China and her own efforts to get the company to monitor hate speech and misinformation on social media. She will add everything from “shocking accounts of workplace harassment and misogyny to the

grueling demands and humiliations of working motherhood during the same time that Sheryl Sandberg, was winning international acclaim for urging women to ‘Lean In.’”