**Andrew Campbell – The psychology of social media addiction**

>> Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney. Raising the Bar in 2017 saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bars across Sydney all on one night. In this podcast, you'll hear Andrew Campbell's talk, The Psychology of Social Media Addiction. Enjoy the talk.

[ Applause ]

>> Good evening. I'm going to take you on a big of a journey tonight. Sounds like it's going to be, we're going to be here for awhile. But no, it's only for half an hour. I'm going to talk you on a personal journey and then talk a little bit about the science. So I want to say thank you, first of all, Sydney University and Raise the Bar for inviting me to talk about this, particularly around, they wanted me to talk about addiction. And I said we're going to do it in a bar. And I thought, yeah. Yeah, they got that. They know that you're going to talk about the things you're most afraid of around the things that make you most comfortable. So I thought, you know, I'll start with a real open confession. Ok. I'm 44 years of age, a father, lecturer at Sydney Uni, husband, friend to many people. And I'm a social media addict. I'm a social media addict. And I thought the journey I'd take you on is how that started. You know, how did, how do people like me become social media addicts? And then let's look, work out is this a good thing or a bad thing? Is it destroying society? Well, for me it started on a Tuesday. It was 1973. You're thinking what? Hold on, Facebook wasn't around then. You're right. It wasn't. So it was a Tuesday in October. October 9th, 1973, and if you're curious why do I know that day, it was my birthday. I came out and I looked around and I went [inhaled breath] they're looking at me. I'm looking at them. This is awkward. How do we make this a social thing? You know, I'm a new baby. I don't have language. They're looking at me thinking gee, he's wrinkly, he's wet. And all I thought was we need to communicate, so I screamed. I yelled. And you know what? It gave me the best joy because immediately, and this is what people tell me because I didn't remember, they wrapped me up and said, oh, isn't he cute. And all I remember was probably the feeling or at least I believe I remember the feeling of that felt good. Social, being social feels good. But to be social we have to gain attention to some degree. We have to be valued. So I thought this is not a bad idea. Let me try the crying out for a while. You know, I'll keep crying for a couple years. And you know what? It wore thin. Crying just didn't cut the social mustard any more. It became annoying to certain people. It became distracting. And it certainly wasn't appreciated in the middle of the night. So I thought I got to try something else that gets their attention. Alright, I'll wet my pants. That'll do it. I'll wet my pants. Yeah, that got attention. Not maybe the attention I wanted, but I was socially still connecting with mum, who is like, oh, well, we'll just fix you up. We'll talc you down and she's talking to me and she's making interesting noises. And I'm thinking hey, this is not bad. She didn't like the start of the social relationship of me wetting my pants, but we had a little chat going on. You know, that was good. And this got a bit old. She wanted me to go to the toilet. And I thought how are we going to talk any more? You want me to go to the toilet. That's not social. So then I realised as a little bit older I had to do other things to get attention, to get talked to. So I acted out. I threw things around. I screamed in the middle of the night. I did all these things that upset my mum and my dad. And then I realised them getting cranky with me actually wasn't the kind of reinforcement I wanted. But I didn't know what I wanted. I just wanted more people to pay attention. So I went to day care. And at day care people liked me for when I played with them. People liked me for when I did nice things with them. And they particularly liked it when I smiled. And you know what was best about that? Sometimes they took a camera out and they took a photo of me smiling. And then they'd show that picture to other people, going isn't he cute? And I then noticed, hey, pictures are a good currency for people to connect to one another. Because mum would actually put pictures of me up around the house and people would walk in going, oh, doesn't he look lovely? And it didn't matter what I was doing. I could be destroying the kitchen. They'd see a picture of me being nice and they'd be going, oh, he can be lovely. And I thought alright, so people want you to be like yourself in a picture rather than yourself all the time. So you know, we get into the 80s now. Pictures, they happen at schools. They happen at sporting events. They happen when you win stuff. And that's all really great, but it didn't happen very often. How do you get that social connectedness? Well, you're constantly looking for things that are going to be creating memories, that you can record. So more photos did happen, but then stories started happening, too. This one time Andrew did this, and the story would go with the picture. But people would forget the story. They'd just see the picture. So I'm going to jump ahead and say that, you know, you hit your puberty years. Nobody wants to photograph that. Nobody. Nobody wants to photograph that at all. And you sure as hell hope to forget it yourself. And I was at this time in my life where it was like, well, I was interested in girls and I wanted to go out, but I was awkward and I didn't know how to talk to them. And showing them cute photos of me as a baby was just creepy now. So I thought to myself why don't I actually try to talk to them about what I like and what they like. You know, having a social dialogue rather than an image dialoge. And sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. And then there was this one girl, one girl that I really, really clicked with and she clicked with me. And she said to me, you know what Andrew? We need to go to a movie together. And I said sure, what do you want to see? And she said Thelma and Louise. I thought I don't know what that's about, but obviously it's two women doing something. Alright. We're going on a date together. I've got to put up with two hours being on a date with a girl I like. Yeah, it works out. I think the social currency there is acceptable. We'll get to be together. Maybe not for two hours we're going to talk, but I suppose I'll learn something about women. Fine. And in this movie they pulled out a Polaroid camera and they took a photo of the two of themselves sitting in a car. And my girlfriend at that time, we're 14, went we got to do that. And all I'm thinking is we're going to get in a car and jump a cliff? What? What do you want us to do? And she says no, no, we got to get a Polaroid camera. We're going to take some more photos of ourselves. We don't have photos of ourselves. This is before cell phones. This is long before the camera phone. So I said alright. And I went and took my Macca's money because I was working at Macca's at that time. And I went and bought a Polaroid camera and we started taking Polaroids of ourselves. Age 14. All these different places. Now she didn't call them selfies, and I didn't call them selfies. She actually called them couplies. So we had all these couply photos around the place. And they faded over time. Everybody who's got a Polaroid camera you'll notice they fade over time. They get grainy and so on. So I thought, well, this is not good. We're not going to remember these things. We need proper photos, but then we got to get money for that and a photographer. And so it was really hard. Anyway, long story short, she broke up with me. And you know, we get to 2000, and I'm obsessed with tech by this time. I'm interested in computers. I'm interested in why the world is moving more and more online. And I thought to myself this is going to be interesting to see how people live online. This is when I kind of started my professional career, moving to psychology understanding online world. And one of the first things I remember is when the first camera phone came out was the advent of taking photos of the self. But before Facebook, before social media, what did we do? We texted those photos to each other. And there was only a small group of people on a phone. You know, your friends, maybe your boss. You know? And there's only so times you can send him a photo of you smiling before they go enough, it's chewing up my data. Right? And so I thought to myself you know what? Someone somewhere is going to invent a device that collects our lives online that we can share with the world. And by that time I think it was My Space started coming around. And young people started jumping on it. And what were they taking photos of? Not just themselves, but everything. Look at this foot! Isn't this foot amazing? And then we started seeing things like photos of the sky and photos of buildings, and all of these things started clouding the internet. And I thought to myself, hmm, there's something going on here. People are sharing their lives as though other people are interested in them. I thought that's really bizarre. So I started thinking to myself, you know what? I need a phone, too. And I started doing it, I started taking photos with my phone, and I started realising one, it's very expensive in Australia at that time. But two, after sending so many photos to my mother and her texting me back just stop, I started thinking what's the purpose of this camera? Why are we obsessed with it? And I thought you know what? I got to start taking more interesting photos. It almost become like a competition of texting the most interesting photo during the day. And so I'm taking photos of like paperclips I've bent at my office desk. And she's just thinking you're losing it, change jobs you know. Then it gets to 2004. We have the advent of Facebook. It comes on. We start opening our Facebook accounts. And I'm thinking this is great. Now I can connect not just to people I know but people I don't know! And I can get them to love me. I can get them to fall in love with this person that was once a really cute looking boy who is now rather middle aged and cranky. And I started taking photos and putting text under them, telling little stories. And I thought, oh, this is good. I'm starting to get likes. Likes! That's powerful. No one else had done that before. When you took a photo and you showed it to somebody, probably would go, oh, yeah. But they were face to face with you. But now when they don't see you they have to say something because it's rude if they don't. So they put this like up. Now it's not a matter about likes, it's about how many can I get. I need at least 100 in a day to feel satisfied that I'm meeting more people, knowing more people, that they like what I like. And so I started thinking you know what? We need to do more of this. We need to actually do more social media in different ways. And so along came people who thought up Instagram. And with Instagram, they said you know what? You need to tell people not just where you're at, what your photo is about, but what mood you have. What temperature is it outside? Where exactly were you at that time? And the next thing I know, I'm taking photos of my latte. I'm taking photos of my dinner. I'm taking photos of whatever pet I've got that month. And I'm posting them online. And I'm getting likes. And I'm thinking this is really good. This is like broadening the social horizons of people that are interested in different aspects of my life. And then suddenly I realised, when the advent of Snapchat came on, I could take photos of other things.

[ Laughter ]

And I'm thinking I could make many 30-second art house films, send them to random people around the world, and see what they think of that. And of course I get comments like I can't unsee that. Stop it. So just when I thought I couldn't get more social media attention after all these wonderful apps and an addiction to reinforcement, I started thinking to myself, well, if we can't go past this, if there's no more things we can share with each other on the planet, how am I going to get my fix? People are going to get bored of seeing my latte. People are going to get bored of seeing me smile in the morning having breakfast. People are going to get bored of me saying I'm bored and taking photos of a bored face. So it occurred to me one day, probably when I was actually getting up, going to the bathroom, sitting down, doing your first morning evacuation, and doing a ranting tweet because that's now the vogue. You know, you've got to rant when you're on the bathroom, or in the bathroom. And I'm thinking to myself maybe I'm not addicted. Because at the moment on planet Earth, there is 1.8 billion people sharing a photo or a meme or a something about themselves every two seconds. Every two seconds. And the internet, which is out there forever now, is filling up with all this social media that people are sharing about each other that maybe we're breaking down these stereotypical walls that people are different. And so we are all sharing our same sorts of likes. We're all sharing these things that we want attention for. We're all checking our accounts to make sure people are reading them. Maybe it's not an addiction. Maybe it's being human. Maybe that's what humans are actually about. And then it dawned on me. We aren't social media addicts. We're social addicts. And in fact, psychologically speaking, that is exactly what we do. We seek out social attention. We seek attention because it's part of our survival mechanism. And it's part of our validation system. And it's part of what creates love. It's a part of what creates friendships and lasting interests.

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>> So ladies and gentleman, I wanted to talk tonight a little bit about the fact that it doesn't matter how much you check social media. It actually matters what you do with it. And so one of the things that's probably really important to note here is that if you're wondering tonight if you are a social media addict, it's really a question of are you using it to enhance your life? To make it better? To make other people's lives better? And I thought I'd give you a bit of some statistical facts that we know about Australians and how much they do on social media. Well, the number one thing is we know this. We tend to check out text messages and we tend to check our social media accounts up to 85 times a day. Now if you're already going, well, that's a little on the low side for me, then you're probably in a job where you're required to do it. Now I don't know if there's anybody in the audience who is in media or anybody who's in communications or anybody who is in high business that they have to get a profile out. But you will be tweeting live at an event. You will be photographing live an event. Who goes to a rock concert, takes a photo of the stage, tweets it up or posts it up, and goes look where I'm at? Almost everybody here. For those who don't want to put their hands up, I'm not going to shame you. It's ok. So we do this to share our experiences online. And going back to the addiction equation, that's exhausting. It's absolutely exhausting. The amount of time we actually spend in minutes checking these things and doing it can be up to to three hours in a day. Three whole hours. Now compound that, put it into a week, a month, a year, we could be doing it for two whole months of the year. Now you put into sleep and you're put into traffic jams and things like that, we could be losing up to four months in a year. So social media is taking up a lot of our time. So it's time for us to question are we getting much out of it? Well, the interesting fact is, is that we are. We know that social media is something that is an extension of ourselves. We know that without it we'd probably still be social. I know that I wouldn't necessarily go home and say to my wife, hey, you should have seen the latte I had this morning. It was gorgeous. Got a pen and paper? I'll draw it for you. You can keep it in your wallet, look at it any time you like. But we would be doing things like, I want to tell you about a story of something I saw today that happened that was really amazing. Or this concert that I went to. Or this dinner I was at. We are noticing that social media is changing the art of conversation. I was in Singapore with my wife a couple of years ago. We'd just had our first child. We were exhausted. It was a year on. We had her sisters looking out for the child. Don't worry. We're not those parents, just left them alone. But we're sitting in Singapore and we're at a romantic restaurant, and there wasn't a single table without a phone and someone talking with their phone up. And we were sitting there thinking to ourselves, wow, we're weird. We're the only ones who left our phones back in our rooms and are not using it. And then we caught ourselves going what do we talk about? And that was a terrifying moment. Absolutely terrifying. We suddenly realised that all of what we talk about during the day when we're apart is texted, photographed, commented on, joked about, and then we get home and it's like how's your day? Uh.

[ Laughter ]

We don't actually express ourselves further. But having said that, there's a lot of strengths to social media, too. We actually know that social media helps a lot of people with disability. It helps a lot of people in isolation. When social media started coming around in the 2000s, there was this thing called the Silver Surfer group. That was the early retirees in the early 2000s. And they were finding what life transition was like without having a job to go through every day and their immediate family dependents moved on and doing their own things. They wanted to be connected to their grandkids or the extended family around the world. And when social media came about, it gave them an opportunity to peek into their lives and make comment and be there. Now it's never the best because you're not actually there yourself, but it was the next best thing. And Silver Surfers commented that social media was actually relieving them of depression and anxiety and the disconnection of their loved ones. When we look at people that have disabilities, that are in rural Australia and want to connect to others in school settings and workplaces around the world, to be involved in teams and great ideas and innovations, it was a wonderful advent. When we looked at social progression, using social media for good such as politics in the right direction. And if we look at it right now, even the Yes campaign. Social media can be used for the advent of social progression. Used in the wrong hands, we can see the advent of bullies. We can see people using it to project negative agendas. We can see narcissism at a level that is unprecedented. When we go to narcissism, we go back to the selfie. The selfie itself is one of those things that a lot of people go, well, why do people need to see that many photos of me? Going back to kids for a minute, when we're parents, and I'm one, we take millions of photos. Because we want to capture every moment we can. We want to remember every moment. One parent friend of mine would say I want to make sure that when I'm old I remember every time that child laughed, and I've got videos and I've got photos and I've got everything that made them joyous about having that child. It wasn't narcissism in a sense or parental vicarious narcissism, it was a case of capturing really indelible moments. But when it's ourselves, when we're taking photos of ourselves, what are we really projecting to the world? Now let's all face it. Kim Kardashian would not have had a career without social media. Paris Hilton possibly the same. We're seeing icons here that are celebrated for beauty and for saturation of media. But the contribution to friends and family and others may not be measured as successful. So every time we take a photo of ourselves in our activewear or a photo of ourselves in our fine wear, who are we impressing? The answer is ourselves. We're not impressing those who look at all, though we're checking the likes on it all the time. So that could be something you might be going maybe I need to look at how to reduce these things and be happy with ourselves. So one of the things, and I know I'm probably running out of time already. Yeah. One of the things I wanted to leave tonight on saying is that with social media we've got to look at its balance with its social meaningfulness. Because the problem with social media addiction isn't so much that it is addictive, it's that it is obsessive. And so we don't see it as a clinical disorder right now. We see it as something that's permeated our lifestyle and becoming a norm. And if that's the case it's becoming a norm, we've got to start looking at are we doing something that is meaningful to our health, our wellbeing, our society, and our community? So people, the problem with social media is not the media. It's the people on social media. Now with that, I want to take a selfie of the group.

[ Laughter ]

Thank you very much.

[ Applause ]

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