

My social media sabbatical



By [Jamaaludeen Khan](#)

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Being sensitive to people, offline and online, I know that sometimes people might need a break from me. That might sound funny, but it's true. One of my mentors taught me a poetic verse by Khalil Gibran. It says: "Let there be space in your togetherness." This understanding has been very beneficial to me in a number of ways.

It is for this reason that, every now and again, I remain silent in social media arena for a day or two. 7 April 2013 was supposed to be one of those silent days. And it was only meant to last a day - or two for the most - as is the norm. But after the second day, I thought about stretching it out to a week. Then a week became two weeks, and eventually that turned into a month.

I felt an inspiration to ride this wave, to try to experience life without social media. I wanted to step back, and move out of the busyness of constant engagement and interaction.

Intention evaluation

I share most of what I do online. There are certain things that I keep absolutely private, but most things I share freely. While sharing online about my offline activities, I often evaluate my intention. Firstly, am I doing what I'm doing because it's the right thing and because I want to be doing it? Or is it so that I can talk about it online?

Secondly, when I share my activities online, is it because I want to add value to people and inspire them (as I claim), or is it merely an ego trip?

When you're constantly engaging online it's difficult to truly assess yourself though. You're so busy engaging, so much so that the intention becomes blurred to some degree.

The sabbatical was a great lesson in this area. I found myself doing the same things as before. I was just as busy, and just as productive. This was evidence (to me at least) that I was doing things for the right reasons, and not merely to talk about them online. Business activities, training events, community work, they all continued in the exact same manner without the need to talk about them online. Thank God for that!

Personal values

Knowledge is without a doubt my highest value. I'm always reading and learning, always enquiring and investigating.

My second highest value is sharing, and it's very tightly coupled to knowledge. What is the value of knowledge if it is not shared?

I use many social media apps on my mobile devices, and the frequency of usage of any particular app depends largely on its sharing ability. I'm referring here specifically to content aggregation apps. I use a few of them. If an app aggregates the best content, and has the best interface, but its sharing capabilities are mediocre or absent, I will not use that app.

When I'm reading content via an app, I must easily be able to share that content in a variety of ways, to different people who access information differently.

It's very difficult for me to learn without sharing. The two are intertwined for me. My sabbatical thus prevented me from seeking information online, because seeking information would lead me to wanting to share the same. So I confined my learning to books, audio recordings, and video material. I must say that my learning was more focused and more refined over the sabbatical period, and that is no doubt a wonderful thing.

With my sharing being limited I realised, more than ever, that I have an innate need to share. Social media is thus a key element in fulfilling my highest values: seeking knowledge and sharing it.

Presence

On social media platforms I openly share information (with caution around security issues of course) about where I am or what I'm engaged in. The sabbatical halted this. The downside was that I was not able to share with others and engage with them, getting their opinions and views on certain issues. But the profound upside was that I gained so much presence in what I was doing, because I wasn't thinking about how I would share the experience.

I don't know about you, but I'm a planner. I plan activities, my time, and I plan emails and conversations in my head. So when I'm experiencing something, or learning something, I'll work out in my mind how I am going to share that in the social media world.

When there is no chance of sharing, the presence increases, because you're not trying to work out in your head how best to share what you're experiencing. And that is a wonderful thing.

Social media certainly has its values, but one of the drawbacks is that it decreases our presence. This is especially true when surrounded with friends and loved ones. We're so engaged with people who are not present - via our devices - that we can't engage with the people who actually are present.

I met a lady from the US who works in the social media space. She was in Cape Town doing a workshop, and she said that her family has a 24-hour internet-free block each week. A solid 24 hours where no one is allowed to be connected to the internet on any type of device. I think that's a worthwhile exercise to undertake.

My profession

At present the bulk of my work revolves around social media. I teach it, I consult around it, I develop strategies around it, and I use it extensively for research.

During my sabbatical I found myself giving social media workshops, and consulting on social media usage - and this was all very odd, not being able to engage in social media at the same time. I was forced to open Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn on several occasions during the sabbatical to find people or bits of information. I made sure I did not "indulge" though, and logged out as soon as possible.

Being missed

As the sabbatical progressed more and more people started contacting me via phone or text messages, enquiring if I'm okay. It feels good to be missed. I really care about the people I'm connected to, my community as I prefer to call them, and I really try my best to add value in the best ways that I can. So when people notice your absence, it's a small indication of an achieved mission.

My interaction with social media differs from the casual user because I find myself in the industry. So my sabbatical would be somewhat different to that of another.

This was a personal experience, and it was worthwhile for me. I've only shared it with you in the hope that there might be some value in it for you, and your view on social media.

P/PC balance

Stephen R. Covey talks about P/PC balance. P is Production. PC is Production Capability. We have to attend school for some years, and then we attend college or university, that's all PC - we're enhancing our capability to produce. Once we're good at something, or qualified in some field, we need to shift into P mode - we have to produce, we have to do things, we have to earn a living. A person who studies until the age of 40 without having worked a day in their life is totally out of balance. That's not a studious person. That's a dumb person.

PC continues only while P is in active mode. So while we're working and earning, we're studying some more, improving, expanding.

I reckon social media is fundamentally PC, not P. Social media is part of our learning and connecting, it's part of the intangible necessities. Of course it becomes P when we're talking about producing and doing things like teaching via social media. This report you're reading was most likely accessed via social media. That's P. This is a solid production. But for the most part, social media is more about conversation and interaction.

Lessons

The sabbatical taught me some important lessons:

1. A break from anything will help us to reassess our intentions;
2. Our personal values are a gift, and once we recognise them, we should use them to their fullest potential;
3. In this busy life we should try to slow down, we should try to be present in whichever environment we find ourselves;
4. Over-indulgence in social media (like anything else) is not really beneficial;
5. A short weekly or monthly break will do a lot of good (a one-month sabbatical is not necessary for other than this type of research);
6. Social media is indeed valuable for seeking knowledge, for sharing, for building relationships, for building trust, and for personal and business pursuits;
7. Mobile and online messaging is now basically impossible to escape, unless you want to remain isolated from people;
8. We can all learn from each other, no one knows everything - I have learnt to have more appreciation and understanding for the people who choose to not engage in social media at all;
9. We should stop seeking tomorrow, seeking the goal, seeking the destination - we should view life as a daily experience, and be present in it daily, and appreciate it fully;
10. We need to shift into P mode more often - we need to produce more!

I'm not really big on holidays. I'm very busy and very happy, and I don't feel that I need a break. My vocation is my vacation, as the saying goes. One very big lesson this sabbatical has taught me is that a vacation - unplugged and "unproductive" (if there is such a thing, but I'm implying in the vocation sense here) - can do one good.

So, use social media, but don't indulge in it. Take the best of it, but go and produce things. Be the best at what you do. Produce. Build. Leave a legacy.

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