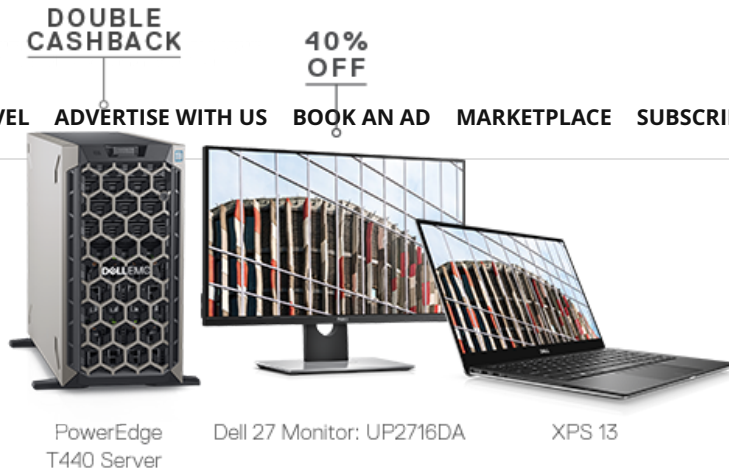


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OPINION Are we on the brink of a social media meltdown?

by ExitBee

There are at least 39 million social media users in the UK today

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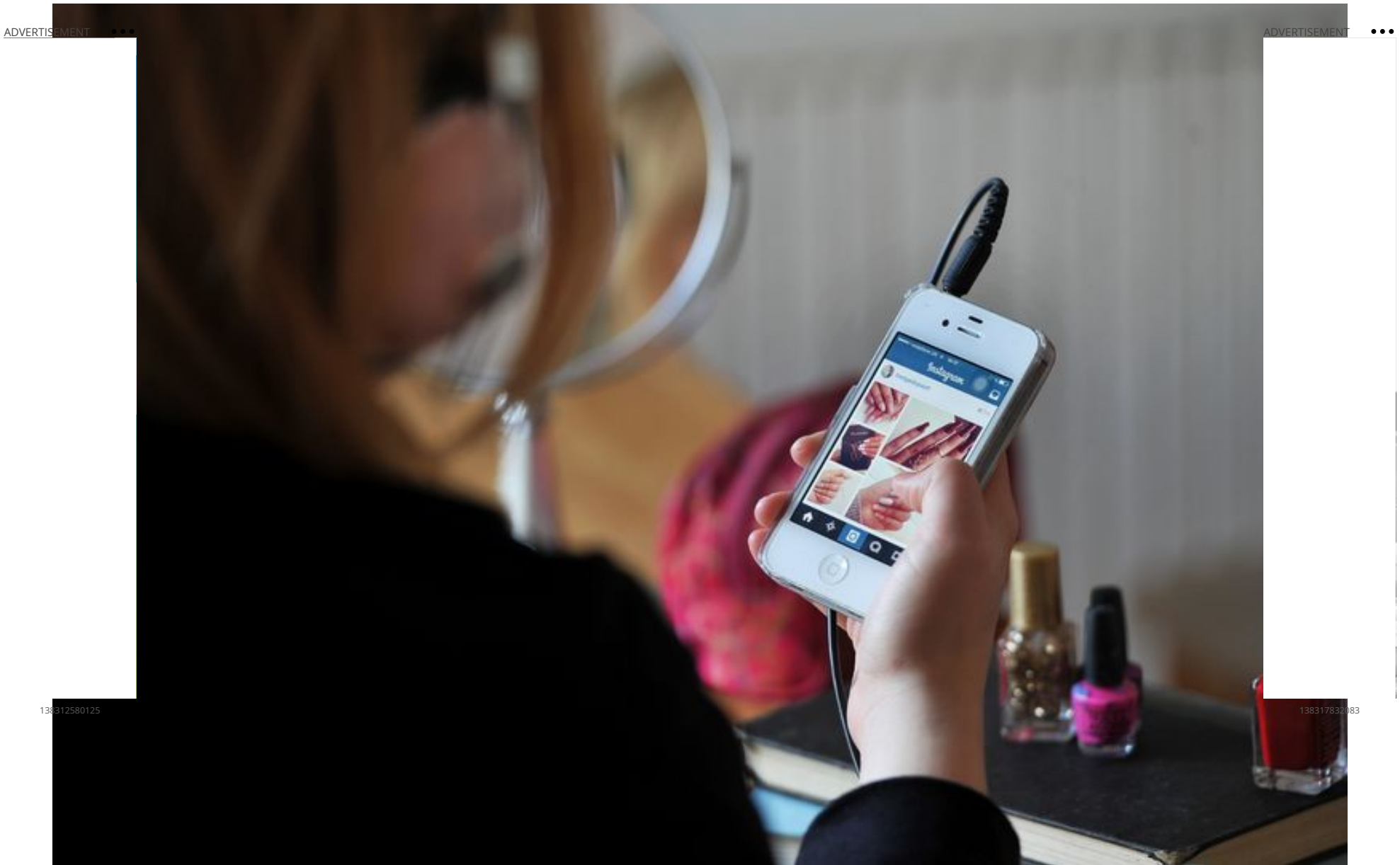
By **John Jewell**
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For the majority in safe, affluent Britain the joy of Christmas was experienced both physically and remotely.

Hands up those of us who didn't use Facebook, Instagram or Twitter to, at the very least, take a little peep at how our friends and family were celebrating?

That we are now a nation in thrall to our networked devices is pretty obvious. [As I've written elsewhere](#), that we are a people online is hardly news, but the latest usage figures from the Office of Communications (Ofcom) are revealing.

The proportion of adults in the UK with broadband connection stands at 83% whilst the proportion of adults who either own or use a mobile phone stands at 94%.

According to internet statistics company [Statista](#) at the beginning of 2017 the total number of social media users in the UK had reached over 39 million, with [Facebook](#) going up to 42 million users.

Privacy

On New Year’s Day, journalist [Arwa Mahdawi](#) wrote of her personal detoxification from social media.

Interaction with Facebook, Instagram and Twitter was “masochistic” she stated and seeing how well her friends were doing increased feelings of lousiness.

Hopping off the approval merry-go-round had reduced her anxiety levels to the extent that she could now coolly evaluate the negative effects of Facebook – and its attempts to **“manipulate and control our emotions”**.

And, as I write, it’s reported that **two major investors** in Apple Incorporated have urged the creators of the iPhone to consider the “health and development” of young people as time spent on personal devices continues to rise.

According to psychology Professor Jean Twenge of San Diego University, the US now has an “i-generation” of teenagers, with recent research pointing to the fact that screen time, and in particular social media use, does cause unhappiness.

More than this, posits Twenge in her alarming article **Have Smartphones destroyed a Generation?**: “It’s not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones.”

Which brings me to the report by Anne Longfield, the Children’s Commissioner for England, which was released last week. Researchers for the publication, entitled **Life in “likes”**, conducted eight focus groups with 32 children aged 8-12 to understand the impact of social media on wellbeing.

As well as highlighting the positives – that social media could inspire children and help them learn about new things – the report also revealed that: “Children felt good when they got ‘likes’ and ‘comments’ from friends, and some Year 7 children were starting to become dependent on them, using techniques to guarantee they would get a high number of ‘likes’.”

ADVERTISE In an interview with the BBC, Longfield stated: “It’s really when they hit secondary school that all of these things come together. They find themselves chasing likes, chasing validation, being very anxious about their appearance online and offline and feeling that they can’t disconnect – because that will be seen as socially damaging.”

But before we completely embrace the idea of a dystopian future where everybody’s entire existence is judged through the prism of social media, it’s time to gain some historical perspective and adopt a cooler approach.

As Professor Sonia Livingstone, who has written and researched extensively in respect of children and the media, has **pointed out in relation to Twenge’s work** – these moral panics around youth and technology are nothing new and technological determinism has been discredited.

Prof Livingstone **acknowledges** that requesting Apple and other manufacturers improve their parental control systems is a useful development but stops short of speaking of addiction.

“Everyone will agree that there is excessive use and even obsession with smartphones, but I don’t believe its addiction,” she said.

And what about the benefits of social media use? Much of the coverage of the phenomena tends to focus on the negatives but as mental health expert **Emily Frith** has written there are studies available cataloguing the positive effects of social media engagement on young people.

Shy or introverted individuals often look online to improve their social skills and become more publicly active.

Chat rooms and forums are known to provide a platform for those who would otherwise be disengaged by the constraints of location or social stigma.

The fact is that social media can facilitate creativity, provide support and help people associate with those of similar interest.

This is especially true for young people with mental health issues. As Frith states, when some teenagers are at risk of suicide they turn to the internet for support.

There is evidence to suggest that “online suicide prevention” has been successful and that social media provides an opportunity to recognise and provide help to those who may be vulnerable.

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All of this isn’t intended to undermine the wealth of material which indicates the multitude of issues connected with over reliance on social media. As ever, the obligation is upon parents and educators to be vigilant in how they monitor and utilise new forms of communication.

This is because we are still in the beginnings of a growing dependency on technology and 49% of the world is yet to go online.

*** Dr John Jewell is director of undergraduate studies at Cardiff University’s School of Journalism.**



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