

Social Media

Do we need a Quaker testimony on Social Media?

BY TIM GEE, General Secretary

In December last year, the Friends World Committee for Consultation disengaged from the social media platform X, previously known as Twitter. So did Friends Committee on National Legislation (US), Quakers in Ireland, Canadian Friends Service Committee, and many others, united by concerns about the site, in particular since Elon Musk's takeover.



The issues had been stacking up for some time. As far back as 2018 Amnesty International was calling on Twitter to address the problems of abuse on the site, including by investing in content moderation. Now it is clear things have gone in exactly the wrong direction. Reports about the spread of misinformation ahead of last year's racist riots in Britain provided another prompt towards pulling away. Then there's the overt closeness of the site's owner to the incoming US administration, and the apparent assertiveness of said owner to push his views on everyone else.

This is not a political point, rather it is part of trying to remain nonpartisan. If the owner can amend the controls to ensure his own voice is amplified, he is very capable of doing the same for other political actors with whom he agrees.

X represents an extreme case, in which a platform has so clearly gone beyond the line, that pulling back and investing time and energy elsewhere is the obvious option. It does prompt an obvious question though, which is, where the line is. In the case of this decision there is also an answer: the line is where the bad seems to outweigh the good. Are the alternatives better? For now, they probably mostly are, but it still makes sense to be vigilant.

As 'practical mystics' who rather than retreating to the monastery engage with the world, Quakers navigate difficult questions. On one hand - at least among unprogrammed Friends - our worship is rooted in silence, and there's a certain reverence for the connection with the divine which can't be expressed in words. A US journalist recently opined that Quakerism is the antidote to Twitter.

Social media can be habit forming, or even addictive, prompting us to look again at the advice designed in the days before social media, with relation to alcohol or drugs: 'consider whether you should limit your use of them or refrain from using them altogether'. On the other hand we want to get the word out that we are here and we're welcoming, so people can find out more. We also want to make the world more just and peaceful which means talking with people where they are, which, a lot of the time, is on social media.

It was always an exaggeration to label the events of the Arab Spring the 'Twitter revolutions' but it's also true that social media can help connect people working for justice, and to counter the bottleneck on information otherwise held by the newspapers and broadcasters. But the rise in social media has not led to an increase in democracy. In some ways the opposite has happened. Let's face it, the traditional/'old' media is hardly a bastion of truth, before social media or now. For a while it felt like social platforms were a place where mainstream media falsehoods could be corrected. But now it feels like that has been taken advantage of.

People or organisations, sometimes behind unaccountable avatars, can now take the opportunity to spread conspiracy theories and disinformation. A world where there is significant doubt about trusting anything is ripe for the rise of untrustworthy leaders. Part of the problem is it is all so new and has grown so fast. Twitter/X is only 18 years old; in human years just about able to vote. In that time, it has grown to 600 million users including many journalists, politicians and opinion formers. Facebook/Meta is two years older and claims more than three billion users. More than four billion people in the world are users of a social media platform of some form or other. Good or bad, social media is here to stay.

Should we see social media like a kind of global 'town square', as Twitter/X would like? I may have fallen for that marketing myself. No, it's not. Might it better be seen as a form of media, in a similar way to a newspaper or television channel? Maybe, although their owners don't think so. I think the most straightforward way is to simply understand each platform as a business seeking profit or, failing that, serving the interests of its owner. Businesses of course can bring social good. Many Friends were and are part of the fair trade movement which has shone a light on the harm done by the dominant exploitative model of trade and have provided co-operative ethical alternatives. Right now, the world is ripe for a form of fair-trade social media company. In the meantime, we've joined BlueSky which at least has the advantage of being decentralised.

In a very small way, I've long dreamt of a kind of 'Quaker app' where you can find an online Quaker meeting happening somewhere in the world and join it straight away, or maybe chat with another Quaker in real time, even meet up in real life if you are nearby. This isn't suggested as a replacement for social media. We are likely to spend an increasing part of our lives online; life will be transformed in the coming two decades every bit as much (and probably more than) has been the case in the two decades since Facebook was born.

In the meantime, we will keep feeling our way forward. Yes, we do need a testimony on social media, but our testimonies are not policy positions or manifestos; they are a cumulative body of action and reflection. A testimony today might accept that we be part of social media, but that it be approached discerningly, without forming a dependency, always listening for the promptings of love and truth, and able to leave if a line is crossed.

We are led by the Spirit, as we always were and always will be.

Note: As part of the Quaker Settlement Programme 2025, a workshop called Walking Cheerfully over the Earth with Tim Gee, will be held 27-29 June at the Settlement. For more information visit www.quakersettlement.co.nz