Social Media – building walls or bridges?

Social media is a good thing. Social media is a bad thing. Discuss. Sounds like a question on a university philosophy paper. And the answer of course is that it can be both good and bad, depending on how it is used and for what purposes.

It's easy to find positive examples of using social media and IT for beneficial results:

- Doctors using instant messaging and live video to help each other diagnose and treat patients https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2016/sep/18/mdlinking-messaging-app-virtual-reality-tool-connect-doctors-sharing-economy
- Teachers facilitating their pupils' use of IT to explore topics and present their conclusions in creative ways https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2016/feb/17/20-ways-to-use-a-tablet-in-the-classroom
- Delivery companies empowering customers to track the progress of deliveries, so we don't have to stay in all day waiting
- Friends and families using Whatsapp to make arrangements to meet or keep each other informed
- Using virtual platforms for meetings, instead of having to travel

It's equally easy to find examples where social media and IT has negative impacts on people:

- A visit to your GP who spends 30 seconds talking to you and 4.5 minutes interacting with the computer
- Pupils using their mobile phones to cheat in exams, or feeling pressure to manage their social media image https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jan/05/students-cheating-mobile-phones-gcse-exams-a-levels-2017
- Automated communication, email accounts that you can't respond to, hanging on the phone through a series of options to get through to someone who can help
- Participants on training courses communicating through their phones and missing the opportunity to network with each other during breaks
- The "email epidemic" (Cary Cooper) - managers spending half their time on their emails instead of doing what they are really paid to do http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-32622224

Social media has enabled quick and easy communication between people and massive sharing of information and knowledge. It can act as a bridge to others, or as a barrier. We couldn't do without it. Yet is also poses significant challenges: our brains haven't evolved in pace with technology; we have social needs - to feel that we matter, that we are competent, that people like us, (Will Schutz) - and corresponding fears when our needs are not met. These needs and fears seem to be exacerbated by social media, the need to be always "on" and in contact with others. It's not the technology that's the problem, but how we use it. The great opportunity for us as type professionals is to help people evolve the mental strategies and personal disciplines to control social media, rather than letting it control us.

Catherine Stothart