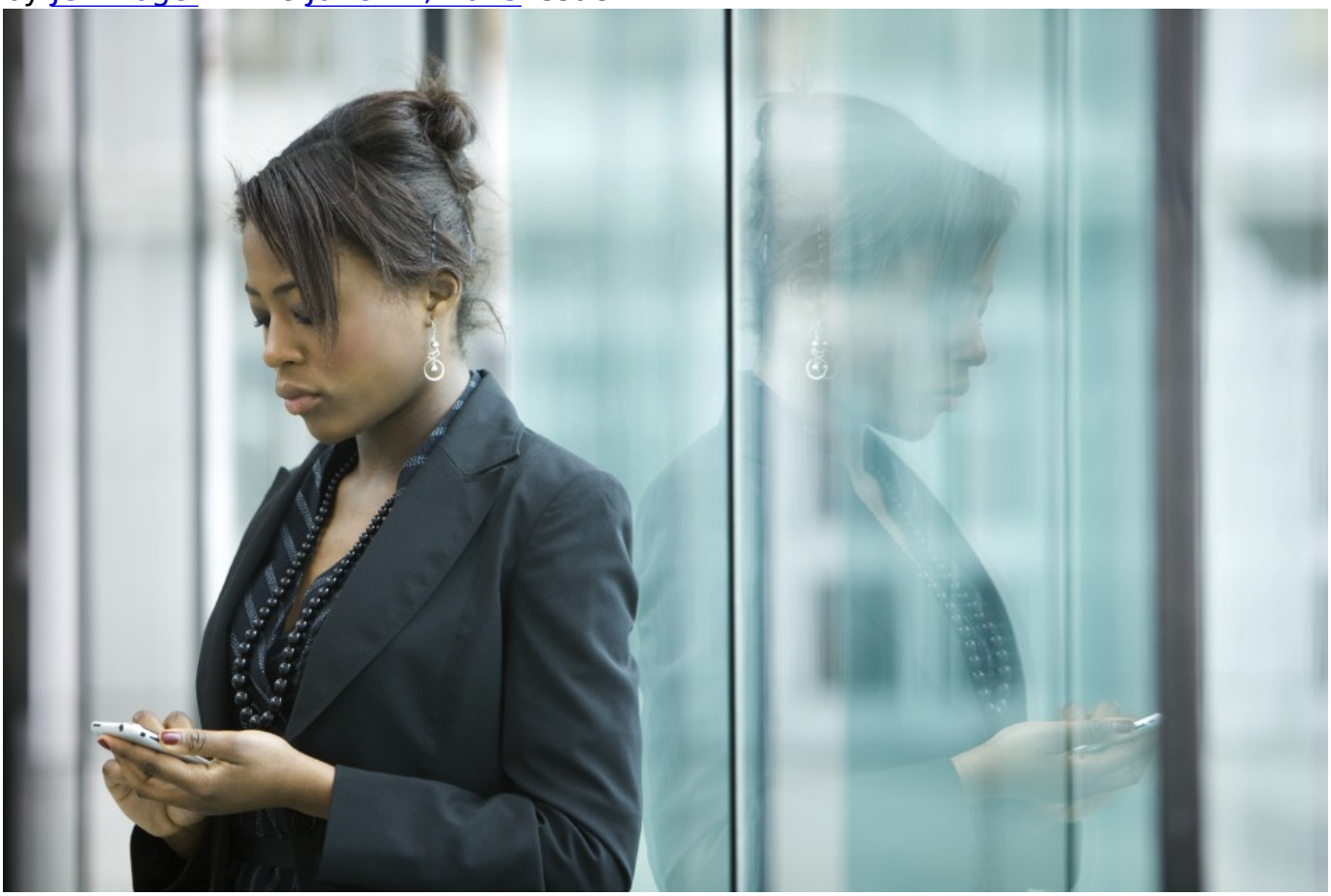
Manufactured disruption: Why we keep checking our phones

We seem to always want something—anything—to happen. This has implications for the life of prayer.

by Jeff Vogel in the June 24, 2015 issue



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It’s difficult to comment on a cultural transition when one is in the middle of it. But there’s no denying that our use of social media is transforming our lives. Critics have sounded the alarm often: we are becoming less social. We are civically disengaged (a thumbs up or retweet is deemed a sufficient contribution to a cause). We are more superficial, too easily entertained, and indiscriminate consumers and purveyors of information. We are narcissistic.

I share many of these concerns. On the other hand, I take seriously those who ask, “Is this new? When weren’t we the ‘characters’ we are now?” and similarly, “Doesn’t entanglement in the social network simply expose personal inadequacies that were always present but once known only to our closest confidants?”

It’s worth pointing out, too, that the claims of alarmed critics can be challenged. Who defines what socializing should look like? Are we going to define the world so narrowly that it can’t be inhabited digitally—any less, that is, than the pages of a book? And haven’t social media proved their utility in key moments—in the Egyptian revolution of 2011, for example, or more recently in Hong Kong to defend freedom of speech? Perhaps it’s too early to know the long-term effect of social media on our habits of being, acting, and knowing.

Yet those with a religious interest should be reflecting on the potential effect of social media on their faith and practice. One such potential effect derives from the phenomenon of “checking.” In *The Lost Art of Reading*, David Ulin illustrates what I mean by this term: “I can check my e-mail in an instant, and twenty, thirty times a day, I do. What am I looking for? Something, everything, a way of staying on top of the information. . . . it doesn’t matter. The looking is an end unto itself.”

The act of checking—e-mail, Facebook, the headlines—is typically brief; in fact we rationalize the frequency with which we check our devices by citing the lack of time needed. The word *checking* itself—noncommittal and nonchalant—makes the point for us, though we often say “I’m just checking” to drive it home even more.

Those of us who stay close to our devices should ask ourselves what keeps drawing us to them. Are we looking for looking’s sake? That may account for our often mindless use of social media but not necessarily for our frequent visits. Why do we return again and again, as if observing a device-driven liturgy of the hours? I’d like to suggest that in addition to the desire simply to look, we are in pursuit of interruption. We are creating an occurrence when there is none because we want something—anything—to happen. No doubt it’s a minor foible, but it has implications for the life of faith, particularly the life of prayer.

Evagrius, a fourth-century monk who lived in the Egyptian desert, offers in the *Praktikos* a clue to my meaning. Noted for his keen diagnosis of spiritual maladies, Evagrius provides an account of the eight “thoughts” that trouble the person devoted to a life of prayer—these eventually came to be reconfigured and known in

the West as the seven deadly sins. One, acedia, was personified by Evagrius as the "noonday demon" (Ps. 91:6) because its force was felt by the monks most often at midday when the desert sun was at its brightest. Evagrius describes the demon:

> First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour, to look now this way and now that to see if perhaps [one of the brethren appears from his cell].

This demon is shrewd, tempting the monk not so much with a material sin as with a reminder of the sheer length of time he must spend in his vocation, the ever unfinished nature of his business, and his lack of progress toward his goal. According to Evagrius, this thought causes the most trouble of all because it calls the monk's whole way of life into question and overwhelms his resolve by focusing his mind on the endless demand: after this moment, there will be more time. And after that, still more. The result is a crushing sense of futility that the monk is tempted to alleviate. Paradoxically, his confrontation with time generates an obsession with time. He peers endlessly out the window, seeking anything that might require his attention. In short, he seeks an interruption.

The counsel of the Christian spiritual tradition regarding acedia has always been to stand and fight. Given that acedia is ultimately a temptation to flee from the spiritual struggle itself, no other advice would really do. Unlike the thoughts of lust or greed, whose hold might be weakened by removing oneself from the sources of temptation, this thought incites the desire to remove *oneself*. It goads one to move to other places, to no longer endure, to fail to remain.

We would be flattering ourselves to make a direct comparison between our own listless looking and the monk's experience of acedia. It is precisely the latter's single-minded purpose, his willing one thing to happen, that provokes the assault of the noonday demon. Boredom, if that is what usually ails us contemporaries, may not completely work as an analogy. There's a desperation in the monk's frenzied looking that has no immediate counterpart in our own.

Still, the description of acedia is useful in thinking about our own habits. What compels us to respond so suddenly to the sound of newly arriving e-mail, the vibration of a text, or the sight of another notification? It's often as if we were

waiting for the disruption, even holding ourselves ready to receive it. What causes us to view every detail in the lives of others with such regularity—what they're eating, where they're going, what they're thinking—in short, what's happened on their timelines?

There is something of the monk's desire for interruption in our own looking. The difference, of course, is that we have the occasions of interruption at hand. We avoid the desperation and any experience of struggle because we can *create* the interruptions whenever we choose. There will always be an occurrence on another's timeline; somewhere, something is always taking place.

Perhaps, as we drift along swiping and scrolling, we have achieved the "total (totalitarian) present" imagined by George Steiner. Perhaps that's the point.

Most of us don't have what it takes to be Desert Fathers and Mothers. But these men and women are not as foreign to our experience as we might think; they show us, in an unusually accentuated way, the struggle of every person living before God. It is the task of every Christian—monk or not—to persevere in prayer (Rom. 12:12, 1 Thess. 5:17). This refers to petitionary prayer as well as to the hesychasm practiced by solitary contemplatives (see Luke 18:1–8). Spiritual writers like Evagrius argue that our ability to pray is harmed when we make a habit of seeking interruption and become accustomed to breaking away. Why is that?

The problem with prayer is that it is often characterized by not doing anything at all. Frequently, it's more like an act of waiting—not pure passivity, but a dynamic posture in which one must hold oneself open in receptivity to God. Those whose lives were devoted to prayer, such as the Spanish mystics of the 16th century, attest to long stretches of eventlessness in prayer, even oppressive bouts of aridity in which the will to go on dries up and a veil seems to hide God completely. As with the monk wrestling with acedia, these writers note that the one praying must weather such periods. There is no way around them.

If periods like this are inevitable in the life of prayer, that inevitability need not be attributed to any coyness on the part of God, or even to God's penchant for testing us. Christians believe that only God can give God's life to us. God cannot be arrived at, but can only come to us. God is, in a word, personal. Prayer is the practice of being formed into capable recipients of God's life. If there is much in us that must be undone or transformed in order for us to become such recipients, we can expect the

process to be slow and even painful at times.

For most of us prayer takes place at a much lower level than that of the mystics. But the same pattern holds. The fate of prayer—particularly contemplative prayer—is bound up with this idea of aridity. If we understand waiting on God only as a lack of doing or a loss of time, and not as an attitude that we must adopt and hold, prayer becomes difficult. It becomes impossible if we are habituated to seek out interruptions and manufacture occurrences.

The checking habit may eventually exhaust itself, both at the cultural level and with the individual. But in the meantime, we might be wise to view this impulse as the latest invention of the noonday demon.