“We’ve come along way Baby” seems to be a cliché that fits well concerning how far we have come in a relatively short period in regard to computers, the technology surrounding them and how they are used for communication. It took around one hundred years to get from the telegraph to the telephone. It was less than 50 years later that the first computer was being programmed for use. Computers evolved over the next 75 years to become a key component in how we communicate to others and to the world at large. The new computerized communication tools that are used today are known as “social media” and have many benefits as well as drawbacks.

So, what is social media exactly? Joanne S. Black, a professional speaker and founder of the company No More Cold Calling, likes this definition: “Social media is a group of online technologies and practices that human beings use to share opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives with one another.” (Black) Face-to face communication was the main tool used for many years for providing an avenue for people to share what was on their minds. We see the main tool moving more toward social media with each new generation.

Individuals use this relatively new form of communication to stay in touch with larger audiences than the telephone or even e-mail allow. Pictures are taken on a smart phone and instantly downloaded to a Facebook page where multiple friends can view and comment on the
photos. Someone can comment on current events and draw in conversation from many people at one time. The positive uses for this form of communication are endless and not limited by anything other than the imagination of the user.

Social media is used by more than just the individual. Businesses and government entities are also taking advantage of the potential that exists through social media. When social media friends “like” a store or a product, not only does the business connect with one person, but the connection travels along to all of her social media friends as well. There is a certain amount of trust for that product that comes along with a friend liking it. It’s clear to see that social media advertising has potential for a return on investment.

Linked-in is being used by potential employees and employers to find one another as they search, on one hand, for the best candidate and, on the other hand, for the perfect job. It is a great resource for professional networking and for finding a wealth of good information regarding tips and tricks in finding employment through forums, conferences and blogs.

The government has been much slower in utilizing social media but government agencies do see the benefits and use it to some extent. Most agencies that utilize it do so to educate the public about its mission or to improve citizen access to agency information. Internal use of social media by government agencies is also low. (Kenyon) But as they pick up speed in using this form of communication, all will benefit by having greater access to government information.

Social media can and has been used in negative ways as well. We have all heard stories of a young person “friend” someone through one of the many social media formats only to have the new “friend” expose the innocent to many forms of negative material. It can go as far as causing physical and emotional harm to the young person. It has also been used for bullying by both young and older users as well, with serious consequences.
Other negatives regarding social media range from lack of exercise among many people who are heavy users of this form of communication, lack of concentration as beeps, pings and other things distract the user and, there are dangers for those who cannot leave there smart phones alone long enough to concentrate on driving. However, the negative aspect that has the greatest impact is the lack of face-to-face communication due to social media tools being used in place of it.

Joanne S. Black states that, “As great as it is, the digital world threatens our personal connections. Even with lightening-fast computing power and immediate, 140-character Twitter posts, we are a face-to-face species, one that thrives on interpersonal communication. E-mail, texting, social networking – none of that takes the place of an in-person connection.” (Black)

Stopping to visit a friend on her birthday, singing her the Birthday song over the phone or sending a card in the mail with a personal note included are all still excellent ways to communicate that you care and, they mean more than a “Happy Birthday” on a Facebook page. There are times when a friend is hurting and could really use a warm, friendly hug over an “I’m so sorry to hear about your troubles” in an e-mail or through any other social media tool.

True friendships are mostly formed through personal interaction that includes all forms of communication, including body language, tone of voice, and touch. Relationships built through social media tools are lacking these things and so do not allow you the full benefits that can come only through face-to-face relationships.

So for the most part, social media tools provide many benefits in our lives. However as in all things, discernment is necessary as we post, tweet and ping. And, what the social media world has to offer does not have the ability to replace face-to-face contact.
Works Cited

