The social media overdose

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There was a time not too long ago when going online to check Facebook and WhatsApp was a pleasure. You could catch up with what your friends were doing, post a few comments, chuckle over a new joke, and whenever you felt like it, post something of your own. A few advertisements used to spoil the fun, but not too much.

I lead quite an active offline life, but I do enjoy virtual life too. Getting likes and appreciative comments on my posts from friends, acquaintances and even total strangers gives me a high, especially when I am feeling downcast. The occasional adverse comment, if it amounts to constructive criticism, is also welcome.

This does not mean that I am not so naïve as to believe all the praise that comes my way; I take it all with a pinch of salt. But the fact is, like all normal human beings, I like it. Praise is definitely a morale-booster, it makes you strive to do better.

But what is happening to Facebook and WhatsApp these days? Switch on your data connection and watch helplessly as hordes of hate messages, doom messages, and inane jokes flow in, clogging your mobile space and worse, warping your mental processes. All over, people are either spewing venom or spreading panic. You see more pictures of political leaders and trolls on them than any of your online friends. You have to scroll through hundreds of meaningless forwards to get to see at least one worthwhile post from someone you know or something you want to know about.

Sifting through the chaff to read at least one meaningful message is consuming more and more time. The option I use most these days is the Clear Chat function - without reading most of the messages I get.

For a long time, political parties did not realise the power and reach of Facebook and WhatsApp. Now they have. Though in the earlier stages, the focus was on promotion of each party’s leaders and achievements, now it has changed to putting down their opponents. The Net has become a forum for denigrating the political figures you hate, making them the subject of cruel humour. The language that is used is pure vitriol, words and phrases you wouldn't use even against your worst enemy. In any incident or issue, be it a shocking murder, a monumental fraud or the price of a consumer good, an all-out effort is made to find out a political angle to it and portray it in a way that it hurts the rival party.

Another agenda is the propagation of fear all around. If one believes all that is said on the WWW, each one of us is in danger of being murdered in our homes, gunned down in the streets, struck dead by an incurable virus on the rampage or all together, at any moment. I cannot figure out what special kick the people who do this get out of it – except probably the rise of anarchy.

The never-ending jokes are maybe of lesser concern than the hate and doom messages, but only slightly. We are bombarded with them, mostly old jokes from our childhood days, rehashed or translated into the local language. It has got to the stage where you can’t tell a joke any more in a crowd, someone will have already seen it or something similar on WhatsApp. Sadly, original wit is dead.

As your friend list and the number of groups grow, so do the recreational hazards of the social media. But just like any other kind of addiction, it is not easy to simply reduce your usage or quit cold turkey.

I think it is high time Mark Zuckerberg developed a Boredom Button.