

# **Address by Emma Tobin on the faith experience of young people in the digital media world**

**Seminar in Saint Patrick's College, Maynooth, to mark World Communications Day 2019**

**“At its heart faith is about action, and love, and neighbourliness, and getting young people involved in programmes where they can see the positivity they are bringing into the world is so important, and social media is the way to get people involved.” – Emma Tobin**

When I started secondary school, if you didn't have Facebook, you may as well not have existed. If you didn't have Facebook, nobody could tag you in anything, no one could like your posts or, perhaps most importantly, your profile pictures. The number of likes you could rack up on a picture of yourself was a real mark of your influence and general relevance within the social hierarchy.

Facebook was useful, in a sense, as a means of figuring out where you stood within the many cliques and faction that made up the 120 first years. If someone tagged you in one of the tagging games, which allowed you to designate the 'craziest' or 'prettiest' or 'smartest', then that made you their friend. If they didn't tag you, well...

I remember the first time a girl I admired tagged me in one of those games. At that age I was bookish, quiet, and always visibly eager to go to class and learn, so when I logged on and saw that this extremely cool girl whose hair was the envy of the whole year had tagged me as 'the smartest', I stared at the post for a long time. I revisited it too, running my cursor over where my name popped up. I wasn't very good at making friends, and with just that simple gesture, I had been made someone's friend.

It's a powerful thing, social media. I've tried to ignore it, tried to pretend it didn't matter to me if people 'liked' what I said or not, but in reality, it does matter. It mattered immensely, to me. There were very real stakes involved in the comments you wrote on peoples' posts. I knew girls who said the wrong thing and were shouted down by twenty or thirty outraged voices, and it would be naïve to think the cold shoulder disappeared when they came to school the next day. If a boy liked one of your pictures, it was reason to think he liked you.

Of course, when I asked for permission to join Facebook (technically, Facebook is only for ages 13+), I was given a crash course in how to act responsibly online. Many of my friends either joined social media sites in secret or had no oversight whatsoever from their parents. My first Facebook friend was my mother, and I was always surprised when my friends reacted with amazement to that fact. They would never, in a million years, have let their parents near their Facebook pages.

Around when I was in fourth year, I lost interest in the Facebook-style social platform, which generally seeks to connect you with people you already know. Two girls I knew, who I thought of as cool, introduced me to a new website after they heard me complaining about how hard it was to find people who liked to read epic fantasy. It was called Tumblr, a microblogging platform which was then what Facebook tries to be now; a never-ending series of videos and pictures and posts to scroll through. On Tumblr, finding dozens of people who shared your interests was as simple as typing 'Lord of the Rings' into the searchbox. Half a

second later there were 50, 60, 100 blogs all dedicated to discussions, debates, pictures, videos, artwork, and of course fanfiction about that very thing.

That's the real power of modern social media. In a world where technology has made the interests and passions of those around us so diverse, so particular, social media connects us to people who share our passions. Fanfiction particularly has a strange reputation now, as something almost shameful, but I can honestly say I wouldn't be half the writer I am today if I hadn't practically grown up within a community of passionate writers who, for no profit whatsoever, would write hundreds of thousands of words of richly imagined stories in existing fictional worlds. We would read each other's stories, offer helpful criticisms and heaps of praise, encourage each other to keep writing, to keep creating. It's funny, I remember teachers telling me how rare I was, a teenager who read so much, when I knew for a fact that almost every one of my peers was reading for hours every day- online - on Wattpad and Fanfiction.net and Archive of Our Own.

It can be quite isolating, as a young person of faith, in secondary school. It's the age when it's trendy, and important, to question what our parents have taught us. Most of my friends saw only what the media and the internet were telling them about religion. My best friend in the world at that time told me in a whisper, during math class, that she believed in God, and she didn't care what anyone else thought. But she still whispered, and it felt like a secret between us.

That's where social media is important to young people of faith; because it is often not cool to have faith, and it can isolate young people, and therefore make them more likely to let their faith slip away. Social media has the potential to connect people, to give them spaces where they are able to live their faith. I would have loved, in secondary school, to have seen my parish using Facebook and their own website to reach out to young people and get them involved in what interests young people above all else – action. Climate action, social justice action, helping the homeless, helping migrants. At its heart faith is about action, and love, and neighbourliness, and getting young people involved in programmes where they can see the positivity they are bringing into the world is so important, and social media is the way to get people involved.

Social media has definitely enriched my life. I've had in-depth conversations about medieval battle tactics with a girl from Turkey, exchanged theories about Doctor Who with a girl from Australia going through Chemo. It's not just that social media means that if my friend has a problem at 2am my phone will wake me up to be there for them, or that as my friends scattered across the country, across the world to China and Sweden, I've never been unable to contact them. I've spoken to people I've never really met, people I would never have known, people a thousand miles away who needed me after a difficult break-up, who needed me to tell them that they wouldn't be working in a McDonald's in central London forever. Social media is powerful. Less than six months ago I was reading pleas from bloggers I half-knew in Brazil, who claimed that the election of a new president might endanger their very lives. Some of those bloggers have since gone silent. I can scarcely imagine how small my world would be if I hadn't sat on my bed in awe reading as my friend in Istanbul described getting water cannoned during political protests in her city, what she recommended for your eyes after getting tear gassed. In a moment, I can read with my own eyes what Pope Francis is saying about climate, about migrants.

It's powerful, it's magical. It has already changed the world and how we relate to it, how we relate to others. It has shaped me and changed me and made me more aware of the world outside my corner of it. Social media has touched almost every aspect of my life, I think ultimately for the better. Thanks to Facebook and Tumblr, Snapchat and WhatsApp and Viber, there is always a shoulder to cry on, or a miasma of all your favourite things to sink into when the world seems dark. It is, and will continue to be, a part of who we are.

The other day I was walking through my local shopping centre, the late afternoon sun streaming on the polished floors, and with few exceptions every person I passed was not looking at how the sun played on the marble, or the bright displays around them. Their eyes were fixed on their phones. And for a moment, yes, I thought that was a shame. It is. But then I imagined those people lit up with invisible threads of light, signals, connecting them to faraway people, connecting them to invisible worlds and unheard conversations. And I thought it was beautiful too.