Is Social Media Beneficial Or Problematic?

—By Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur, VSM (Retd.)

While Group Discussion (GD) remains popular among most organisations to screen or select candidates for entry-level jobs or admissions to prestigious institutions, many aspirants feel nervous about it and face difficulty sailing through the GD round. This is because quite a few candidates are unaware of the strategy they should adopt to come out as a winner during a GD round. The problem becomes severe when some candidates start shouting and create a fish-market-like situation during a GD round. Therefore, in this article, we will discuss ways to deal with some of such difficult situations. In case some candidates are not able to interject and speak as all others are speaking at the same time, with a little firmness in the tone, you could say that it would be appreciated if we all put our points across one by one so that all of us could get a chance to speak. You could then point towards someone who was struggling to speak and let him express his point. After that, you could express your point of view. In this fashion, you may grab an opportunity to speak. This approach will also display your leadership skills, as you are taking the initiative to put an order into the progression of this discussion. Further, if you possess some basic knowledge of the topic given to you, take the initiative to start the Group Discussion. The advantage of this action is that, at this stage, you can grab the attention of both aspirants and the assessors, and get noticed. Subsequently, you could speak as and when you have some point to convey to consolidate your contribution. However, there is a word of caution here. In case, you have no idea about the topic, it is counter-productive to initiate the GD, as what you would say might not impress the assessors and would go against you.

The above topic was given to a group of candidates for a Group Discussion during the process of selection of Probationary Officers (POs) at a PSU bank. The candidates arrived for this GD wearing formal clothes and were made to sit in a U-shaped arrangement. Thereafter, they were allotted Identification Numbers and asked to address each other with these Identification Numbers and not names. A detailed briefing was then conducted about the do's and don'ts of this GD by

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the three assessors. Candidates were given 3-4 minutes to jot down some points to which they could refer while speaking and they were asked to conclude the GD in 25-30 minutes.

Thereafter, the Group Discussion commenced in the following manner:

Candidate No. 9: Good morning, friends. I presume you all are keen to express your views on this currently much-discussed topic in almost all forums. We know social media is an Internet-based form of communication that allows users to hold conversations, share information and create web content. When the Internet entered daily life around 1983, worldwide connections became an instant possibility. Social media's explosion in the 21st century is much-talked-about news of our times. Social media has many platforms, which include blogs, wikis, social networking sites, photo-sharing sites, instant messaging, video-sharing sites, podcasts and so on. While social media has its first seeds in email, people across the globe are now obsessed with using social media to share information and make connections. As per the topic given to us, we are required to discuss in detail what are the advantages, and also the problems that are created when we use social media. The topic is so vast and, I

know, we are going to have a very engaging discussion. I now invite you all to express your views on this topic. Thanks.

Candidate No. 6: Social media now refers to web-based applications that promote the formation and interchange of user-generated content. The range of social media is now global, with its scope of topics and types of users virtually unlimited. Social media includes Internet sites such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formally Twitter), WhatsApp, YouTube, LinkedIn, WeChat, ShareChat and so on. Thus social media involves interactive technologies that facilitate creating, sharing and aggregating content among virtual communities and networks. Social media helps the development of online social networks by connecting a user's profile with those of other individuals or groups.

Candidate No. 1: Before going any further, I want to talk about the evolution of social media briefly. Social media started in the mid-1990s with the invention of platforms like GeoCities, Classmates.com, and SixDegrees.com. SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997, is often considered the first social media site. It was unique as it was the first online service designed for people to connect using their actual names instead of anonymously. It boasted features like profiles, friends lists, and school affiliations, making it the very first social networking site. The platform's name was inspired by the "six degrees of separation" concept, which suggests that every person on the planet is just six connections away from everyone else.

Candidate No. 8: Yes, I agree. Numbers 6 and 1 have nicely defined and briefly traced the evolution of social media.

Candidate No. 3: I just wanted to add that in the early 2000s, social media platforms gained widespread popularity with Friendster and Myspace, followed by Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Research from 2015 reported that globally, users spent 22% of their online time on social networks, most likely fuelled by the huge availability of smartphones in all countries. As of 2024, there are approximately 5.22 billion people using social media worldwide, which represents around 63.8% of the global population. This is really fantastic.

Candidate No. 9: Yes, I agree. We now observe how social media has become an integral part of modern society, drastically transforming how people communicate and share information online. The growth of social media from basic messaging platforms to new social networks depicts its increasing significance in the culture of the modern world. This is also true that the widespread adoption of smartphones has given a big push to social media's popularity and functionality. In this regard, while apps such as Instagram and Snapchat have shown the potential of mobile photo and video sharing, Twitter, on the other hand, introduced a new model of real-time status broadcasting to the masses. Because of this, currently, modern social networks serve critical social, political, and economic functions for billions of users all over the world.

Candidate No. 8: Friends, the topic given to us requires that we discuss specifically the benefits of social media and its problems. Can any friend talk about the benefits of social media now?

Candidate No. 6: Yes, most certainly, social media has numerous benefits. First of all, it provides openings for professional networking. By utilising social media platforms, people can expand their social networks and increase their connections with others worldwide. By broadening their professional circles, people gain diverse experiences, perspectives, and resources, which can improve their lives and magnify their social capital. Thus, social media needs to be promoted as it gives exposure and enhances networking for promoting individuals' personal and professional growth.

Candidate No. 1: I want to talk about another advantage of social media. It provides a lot more opportunities to enhance personal expression and creativity. By sharing documents, images and videos on online forums, people get an opportunity to work together to achieve common goals, create more meaningful content and solve problems collectively. People can pursue new hobbies or sports which lead to improved social well-being. Through social media connections, one can share knowledge on practically any topic on earth and indulge in more creative pursuits. Thus, social media promotes creativity and collaborative projects in a big way.

Candidate No. 9: Yes, I agree with Number 1. I want to highlight the role of social media in providing educational opportunities and assistance to needy social groups. We know Internet sites offer many online courses that make learning available to a global audience. These opportunities can overcome language barriers and could be made available at a very low cost or even free. Social media can be a valuable tool for students, providing access to educational resources and helping them stay informed with the latest information on any subject. Besides social media being a valuable tool for students, it helps them become socially savvy and connected.

Candidate No. 2: I agree that social media has increased educational opportunities in a big way and top institutions are now conducting all kinds of courses online, which can be accessed by a very large number of students at a reasonable cost, irrespective of geographical locations. That's great.

Candidate No. 6: Friends, yet another significant benefit of social media is its positive impact on improving social connectivity and the mental health of its users. Planned and conscious networking reduces social isolation, feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem. Social media sites provide openings for people to connect with friends, family, and like-minded individuals irrespective of geographical locations. These interactions as a daily routine at several levels lead to positive effects on mental health and social well-being. Of course, the potential negative impacts of addiction to or overuse of social media cannot be ignored.

Candidate No. 4: Yes, I fully agree with you.

Candidate No. 1: I think social media also provides avenues for expanding professional networking around the world, getting access to diverse perspectives, and even exploring new resources that can enrich their social capital. All these provide opportunities for professional development. A well-known example in this respect is the LinkedIn platform. During the last 22 years, the LinkedIn platform has grown tremendously and helped the professional development of many professionals. This has shown the importance of professional connections for both individuals and businesses in a global business environment. The increasing reach of digital technology permits professionals to share knowledge and new opportunities.

Candidate No. 3: Friends, we have listed quite a few advantages of social media and should now discuss various problems it poses. We know social media has now created quite a few problems as well.

Candidate No. 9: Before we discuss problems posed by social media, I recall one very significant benefit of social media. It has presented us altogether new ideas for marketing and business promotions that are hugely advantageous. Now social media platforms are being used to reach much larger audiences for brand promotion, business development, marketing campaigns and interaction with customers. In addition, with the help of Artificial Intelligence (AI), clients' search activity can be easily directed to brands, which is a win-win situation for both clients and business corporates. Thus, social media has provided uniquely beneficial marketing avenues for businesses at a much lower cost and effort.

Candidate No. 7: Yes, that is a big advantage for the business world.

Candidate No. 10: Friends, social media's fantastic reach and impact have also led to much criticism, debate, and controversy. Let us now discuss some problems being faced by social media usage.

Candidate No. 6: Some critics of social media even refer to it as 'anti-social media' because of its negative impacts including loneliness and political polarisation. People who are homeless, living in poverty, or rural communities, etc., do not have or have limited access to the Internet, while people belonging to the urban middle class and urban upper class have easy access to the Internet. So, there is a clear divide or disparity in the unequal access to digital technology, which puts a large section of society at a disadvantage. Further, social media has caused political polarisation which can be a potential threat to democracy. Social media companies give incentives to maximise user engagement with sensational, emotive and controversial material that prevents a healthy discourse on which democracy depends.

Candidate No. 5: Yes, I fully agree. That's a valid criticism of social media.

Candidate No. 1: Some critics have called social media an authoritarian medium because it can stir up hate and division in society that benefits autocrats or some politicians, which is highly deplorable. Social media is considered highly vulnerable to manipulation by politicians, leading to political polarisation and even violence. Moreover, social media has been utilised by extremist groups to gain the attention of sympathisers. It has been reported that jihadist outfits like ISIS and Al-Qaeda use social media to influence public opinion.

Candidate No. 8: In social psychology, a stereotype is a generalised belief about a particular category of people. It has been reported that social media increases the power of stereotypes. However, stereotypes can have both negative and positive connotations. Unfortunately, these stereotypes contribute to the social divide and negatively impact the way users interact online.

Candidate No. 9: In my opinion, social media has hugely affected the way our youth communicate now. Unfortunately, for some young people, social media and texting have largely replaced in-person communications, impacting the development of conversation and other social skills. What is socially acceptable now is highly based on social media. Exchanging sexual

messages and cyber-bullying, even among minors, has increased manifold. Most of the time, people are excessively occupied with social media and are not keen to meet or interact with others personally.

Candidate No. 6: Yet another issue with social media pertains to its reliability, since social media has become a regular source of news and information. Fake news and misinformation are now frequently reported, but platforms do not take responsibility for the accuracy of content and many platforms do not vet content at all. Moreover, researchers have reported that fake news spreads almost 70% faster than truthful news on X. Fake news often propagates in the immediate aftermath of an event. There are also privacy concerns with social media networking services. Platforms collect data which may be made available to third parties for purposes that include target advertising. In the U.S.A., the government banned the installation and use of TikTok on government devices because of security concerns.

Candidate No. 10: Yes, I agree. Fake news and privacy concerns are major issues with the social media.

Candidate No. 1: Another serious problem with social media pertains to 'Internet addiction disorder', which is a problematic compulsive use of the Internet, especially on social media. Young people are at a particular risk of developing this disorder. This is particularly so in the context of students whose academic performance declines as they spend more time online. Some students experience health issues from loss of sleep as they stay awake in nights to continue scrolling, chatting and gaming. Research suggests that social media platforms trigger a cycle of compulsive behaviour, which reinforces addictive patterns and makes it harder for people to break the cycle. A study on Americans aged 12-15 reported that teenagers who used social media over three hours per day doubled their risk of negative mental health outcomes. As a result, phones have been banned from some schools, and some schools in the US have blocked social media websites.

Candidate No. 9: I want to add that Australia has become the first country in the world to implement a nationwide ban on social media platforms for children under 16 years of age. The landmark legislation, passed by the Australian Parliament, is designed to shield teenagers from the harmful effects of social media on their mental health, self-esteem and overall well-being. But, as Australia sets this precedent, a pressing question arises: Should social media be banned for children?

Candidate No. 3: Yes, quite right. After Australia enforced this ban on social media, an animated debate is now taking place worldwide about this issue.

Candidate No. 6: Social media can help students gain extra knowledge and information on any subject. Therefore, teaching young students how to use social media with positive thinking will help develop their mental faculties. We should not overlook the benefits of social media, which provides unparalleled access to huge amounts of knowledge and global connectivity. In fact, I think, we need to teach them how to navigate online platforms effectively. It improves social skills and helps develop digital literacy skills. I feel we must instil a sense of responsibility among children with regard to using social media rather than banning it for them.

Candidate No. 3: Friends, there are quite a few problems due to which I support this ban on social media. Online platforms have proved to increase the rate of suicides, cyber-bullying and hate-mongering. This is a very alarming development. By using social media all the time, children overstrain their eyes and may also be encouraged to do undesirable activities. This may also be hampering their academic performance and other routine activities. Minors may also fake identities to access social media platforms, which is also a matter of great concern.

Candidate No. 8: You are right. Now scammers use fake social media and WhatsApp accounts as well as AI-generated selfies and messages from celebrities and other persons to cheat their victims. This happens because a large number of people are not used to social media, and do not really understand the scammers' modus operandi. These are new developments which are very dangerous.

Candidate No. 4: But what is the Indian Government doing about this issue?

Candidate No. 1: Yes, in India, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has come out with draft rules which seek parental consent for children to join social media. The Ministry does not feel the need to follow the Australian model where children should be banned completely. There is no reported provision to check children from joining social media by giving a false date of birth and declaring they are above 18. I feel there is a need to adopt a collaborative approach by schools and parents to teach our children how to use social media responsibly.

Candidate No. 3: Friends, the time allotted to wind up this discussion is over, and we must conclude now.

Candidate No. 1: If you all agree, I could conclude.

Candidate No. 5: Number 1, please go ahead.

Candidate No. 1: Friends, you would agree, that we all had an absorbing and informative discussion on this hot topic. As the Group Discussion commenced, we explained the wide coverage of social media. Thereafter, we traced the rapid historical development of social media. Subsequently, as per the need of the topic given to us, we discussed in detail the numerous benefits of social media. This followed a discussion on how its usage has become so problematic now. In this regard, we highlighted how the use of social media is causing distress to people, especially children. Later, we also mentioned about the ban imposed by the Australian government on the use of social media by children below 16 years of age, and what steps are being taken by the Indian Government to check the use of social media by children in India. We highlighted the need for a collaborative approach by parents and teachers to educate our children on how to utilise social media responsibly.

That's all. Thanks, friends and you all have a nice day.

Critical Analysis of Candidates' Performance :

Good: 1, 6 and 9
The performance of these candidates was certainly better than the other candidates. They had come well-prepared to participate in this GD and, it was apparent, that they had made efforts to collect desired information and data on this topic. While they spoke adequately, they allowed other candidates also to contribute. Since Number 9 possessed good information on this topic, he rightly took the initiative to start the discussion. These candidates spoke with confidence and other candidates did not contradict them. As they have made a sufficient contribution towards this GD, their performance has been assessed as "Good".

Average: 3 and 8
These candidates also made some contributions and spoke a few times, but their knowledge of this topic was considered limited. Due to insufficient awareness of the topic, they did not possess adequate self-confidence to speak effectively and lead the group. However, they were observed to be guiding the course of discussion in the desired direction a few times, which was their positive contribution towards this Group Discussion. It was felt that they were capable of performing in a better way, had they prepared the topic adequately. Owing to all these reasons, their performance has been assessed as "Average".

Below the Average: 2, 4, 5, 7 and 10
A close look at the performance of all candidates indicates that these candidates had decided to participate in this GD without much preparation. As a result, their contribution was barely visible. They lacked self-confidence and were observed to be only appreciating or showing agreement with other candidates who were actively participating in this Group Discussion. Candidates need to remember that to put up a winning performance in a competitive GD like this, basic knowledge of the topic is a must. Due to these reasons, their performance has been assessed as "Below the Average". **CSR**