

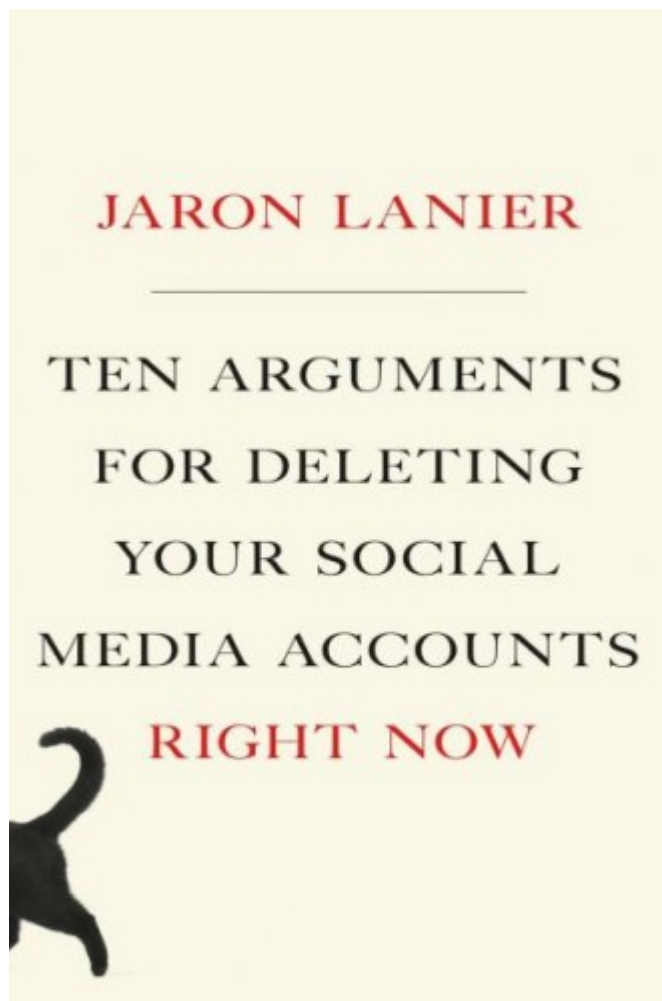
Internet addiction

What happens if our religious dialogue becomes an endless, insufferable holiday office party, where the mean drunk becomes the focal point of everyone's energy?

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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In Review



Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now

Jaron Lanier
Henry Holt

At the end of the year, the *Christian Century* tallies up the articles that got the most readers. Most years, when I look over my list, the posts that receive the most attention are the ones I wrote while feeling critical, angry, or frustrated. I could compose a hundred soul-stirring entries, longing for beauty, but my fury attracts readers. Likewise, when I read the newspaper and I respond to the racist/misogynistic soundbite du jour on Twitter, I get plenty of attention. Vitriol goes viral.

When I imagine the effects of this over decades, I worry. Then I chat with [Diana Butler Bass](#) and wonder, what will happen with our spiritual lives, if the most abrasive and obnoxious religious leaders get most of the attention? What happens if our religious dialogue becomes an endless, insufferable holiday office party, where the mean drunk becomes the focal point of everyone's energy?

I'm human, with a full range of emotions—I experience joy, excitement, suffering, and anger. I particularly cherish the ability to be angry, as a woman who was socialized not to express that emotion. But what happens when only the hot, pointed, ragey parts of myself become exposed to the world?

I almost chalked all of this up to, "Well, humans are horrible and all we like to do is fight." (I am a Calvinist, after all.) Then I read Jaron Lanier's book, [Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Account Right Now](#), where he explained the algorithms, or the calculations that construct our social media.

Techies build social media platforms so that we will become addicted to them. Social media money comes from advertisers who need proof of an audience. To get as many eyeballs as possible, techies studied the brain science surrounding addiction in other areas of our lives. Humans get addicted to alcohol, drugs, and gambling because they give us happiness. These chemicals or experiences of winning create dopamine which translates into a euphoria in us.

But happiness is not enough to keep humans addicted. We need light and shadow. There also has to be risk, a challenge, and a fight. **Addiction is as much**

about the negative as it is about the positive.

Think about it. When a gambler wins, he wants to win more, which is completely understandable. But why would he go back when he's losing? That defies logic.

It's because he doesn't want to leave the table a loser, he wants to make it right. He wants to win back his money. So, both the winning and losing draw him into the addiction.

The same thing happens to us during an argument on social media. We want to make things right, to say the right thing to persuade the other, or to dominate them in order to win. We don't want to walk away a loser, so we become hooked.

Understanding this dynamic, the architects of social media platforms manipulate what we see. We ordinarily see likes, thumbs up, hearts, and happy pictures of dogs and children. Smiling children give us a shot of dopamine in our brains and creates a sense of euphoria in us. But that can't be all we see, or else we will not become addicted, so they construct the media so that we will focus on negative things to keep us fighting and engaged. When we get tangled up in an argument, we want to go back to make it right, by winning or getting in the last word. **Our anger creates addiction.**

This can create a terrible society, especially when it comes to religious dialogue. We have seen it happen in our politics. Could that poison spread to our spiritual discourse?

Does this mean that we should shut down the Internet or delete our social media accounts? I don't think so. Yet we have to be aware of the ways these tools manipulate us, to understand that the Internet is specifically designed so that we will fight with one another. Then, we need to figure out what how we are going to live in this new reality.

"I actually resist posting negative in favor of the positive, even though I know that my work would get more attention if I went toward anger and invective," Diana tells me.

So the struggle continues, as content creators and readers. We must figure out how to construct a life-giving, abundant faith in the midst of a media that thrives on drawing out the worst in us.