



6-1-2015

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## Recommended Citation

Fitzsimmons, Phillip, "The Palantíri Stones in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings As Sauron's Social Media: How to Avoid Getting Poked by the Dark Lord" (2015). *Faculty Books & Book Chapters*. 1.

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# THE *PALANTÍRI* STONES IN J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* AS SAURON'S SOCIAL MEDIA: HOW TO AVOID GETTING POKED BY THE DARK LORD<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The *palantíri* are seven spherical stones in the fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien that can each be used to see things from afar or to communicate mentally with the remote guardians of the other stones. In publication history they appear first in *The Lord of the Rings* and then in *The Silmarillion*. The characteristics, history, and use of these artifacts in the subcreated world of Tolkien (i.e., the Secondary World or Middle-earth) parallel to a remarkable degree the characteristics, history, and use of the Internet, especially social media, in the real world of the reader (i.e., the Primary World). These parallels between the Internet and the *palantíri* are so well matched that Tolkien's narrative comments about the dangers of the undisciplined use of the stones can be applied to the use of social media in the Primary World. In *The Lord of the Rings* they are used for intrigue, first, by the sorcerer Sauron and then by the wizard Saruman; the stones are the medium through which emotional harm and threat are meted out to the hobbit Pippin; and they are central to the ruination of Denethor, Steward of Gondor. Though Tolkien was not prescient of the Internet and social media when writing *The Lord of the Rings*, the striking similarities between the *palantíri* and the Internet provide an example of fantasy literature meaningfully commenting on the Primary World on which it is grounded. It should be no surprise that these parallels would be well developed because relationships, communication, and a critique of technology were important to Tolkien and the other Inklings. This study explores how the "connectedness" offered by social media, specifically Facebook (Vander Veer 1), not only offers an unmet promise to deliver the friendship and fellowship that were critically important to Tolkien and the rest of the Inklings, but it can also present a danger for the unwary.

Tolkien's writings indicate his conviction that only person-to-person interaction creates true bonds of friendship, while machines, whether magical or man-made, corrupt fellowship at its very core and must be used with discipline.

## The Origins of the *Palantíri* and Social Media

The most succinct description of the etymology and history of the *palantíri* is voiced by Gandalf in *The Two Towers*:

“About the *Palantíri* of the Kings of Old,” said Gandalf.

“And what are they?”

“The name meant *that which looks far away*. The Orthanc-stone was one.”

“Then it was not made, not made”—Pippin hesitated—“by the Enemy?”

“No,” said Gandalf. “Nor by Saruman. It is beyond his art, and beyond Sauron's too. The *palantíri* came from beyond Westemesse from Eldamar. The Noldor made them. Fëanor himself, maybe, wrought them, in days so long ago that the time cannot be measured in years.” (202-03)

The name *palantíri* (from the Quenya language) is defined in the index of *The Silmarillion* as “[t]hose that watch from afar”, the seven Seeing Stones brought by Elendil and his sons from Númenor; made by Fëanor in Aman” (346). *The Silmarillion* identifies Fëanor, the creator of the *palantíri*, as an elf described as “of all the Noldor, then or after, the most subtle in mind and the most skilled in hand” (S 64). The *palantíri* are mentioned as another of his copious achievements in line with the discovery of the technique for making remarkable gems:

[H]e it was who, first of the Noldor, discovered how gems greater and brighter than those of the Earth might be made with skill. The first gems that Fëanor made were white and colourless, but being set under starlight they would blaze with blue and silver fires brighter than Helluin; and other crystals he made also, wherein things far away could be seen small but clear, as with the eyes of the eagles of Manwë. Seldom were the hands and mind of Fëanor at rest. (S 64)

*The Silmarillion* narrates that at the end of the Second Age of Middle-earth, Elendil and his sons survived the deluge with many heirlooms aboard ship including the seven *palantíri* (S 291-92).

In Tolkien's subcreated world, the colored gems of Fëanor—stones that “under starlight [...] would blaze with blue and silver fires” (S

64)—led to the next higher achievement in the creation of the *Silmarilli*: three stones made incandescent by encapsulating liquid light from the two trees of Valinor. Fëanor's next advancement in craft was the creation of the even more astonishing *palantíri*, which enabled their users to view things from afar and communicate mentally with other guardians of the stones.

When exploring the parallel between the appearance of the stones in *The Lord of the Rings* and the contemporary commercial use of computers with an emphasis on social media, the natural question to ask is whether the comparison extends to their origins. Is there a corollary for Fëanor and other figures such as Gil-galad that line up with major figures in the development of computer technology? A look at *It Began with Babbage* shows that the seams of the argument are not stretched by extending the comparison into the past. Two remarkable figures from real-world computer history are Charles Babbage and Alan Turing. The history revealed by the wizard Gandalf to the hobbit Pippin, after the latter's near-disastrous encounter with one of the stones, is strikingly reminiscent to that of the Internet and its current use in social media such as Facebook. Computer technology has its earliest origin, comparable to the First Age of Middle-earth, with the Jacquard loom, Babbage's inspiration, which used punch cards to guide the automated looms to create intricate designs into silk cloth during the 1800s in France. The process was faster than humans could weave or sustain the production and the repetition of patterns (Dasgupta 20). This incredible invention parallels the earlier products of Noldorin craft such as the clear stones of Fëanor described above that would blaze when placed in starlight.

The Jacquard loom was followed by the creation of the difference engine, a hand-cranked calculating machine designed by Charles Babbage (Dasgupta 11) and built later by Per Georg Scheutz (15), also during the 1800s, and originally financed with great hope by the British government (23). James Essinger describes how Babbage kept a finely detailed portrait of Jacquard made by a Jacquard loom to show members of his salon the intricacy of detail possible by the card-programmed machines (Dasgupta 4-5). Babbage's ultimate goal was to eliminate human error and tedium through an analytical engine that would be able to crank out and print tables of calculations of complicated mathematical problems for science, engineering, and the military (17). Babbage was a striking figure in the history of computer technology due to his invention of the difference engine because the sophistication of thought necessary to produce a working hand-cranked computing machine is an order of imagination beyond most other skilled inventors. Even today it is a startling

achievement. Babbage was the Fëanor of the real world. The Jacquard loom was an earlier creative invention that led to the difference engine and the many engineering drawings Babbage drew that worked out the mechanics of an analytical engine. Both the creation of the stones and invention of computing machines each stretched their respective disciplines beyond anything achieved earlier. Admittedly, Babbage was unlike Fëanor in that he was not able to produce a physical realization of the things he dreamed with his imagination. But Babbage left copious drawings of ever-improved models of the analytical engine, the earlier versions of which were discarded before completion. Eventually, the British government lost faith in him and stopped funding the project (Dasgupta 23). Contemporary engineers have analyzed Babbage's plans for the analytic engine and begun raising money to build one because of their confidence in the design ("Plan 28" n. pag.). However, both Babbage and Fëanor each worked out techniques demonstrating their respective "subtleties of mind," "skill in hand," and each was rarely "idle" in his ever-evolving perfection of technique, in stone craft for the former, and in mechanical engineering for the latter.

There have been many contributors to the development of computer technology after Babbage. Another towering figure was Alan Turing in the first half of the twentieth century. Like Babbage he was a mathematician. Also like Babbage and Fëanor he had extraordinary imagination and continuously contributed to his craft by pushing its limits. In a 1936 mathematics journal, he described computer architecture that is the foundation of electronic computers even today (Disgupta 51-56). The machine described is known as the Turing computing machine. Even so, Turing's contribution during World War II was in cryptography, not in the development of computer technology (77).

Time of an earlier age shrouds the certainty of whether or not it was Fëanor alone who created the *palantíri*, expressed when Gandalf says, "The Noldor made them. Fëanor himself, maybe, wrought them, in days so long ago that the time cannot be measured in years" (*TT* 203). Likewise, definitive credit to Alan Turing for his contribution to computer design after WW II is also shrouded by time. Historians believe he contributed further to computer design by possibly originating the idea of the stored-program computer that had internal memory for both performing a calculation and storing the results (Disgupta 113). The significance of this idea is described by Subrata Disgupta as follows: "This concept was like the crucial missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle. It was instrumental in the formation of a style for the logical and functional organization of computers—for computer architecture" (92).

Both Babbage and Turing were mathematicians who advanced techniques for the improvement of science, engineering, and ultimately the military. They understood the workings of their discoveries in the way that a craftsman understands the significance and all the consequences of changes in design or use for the products of that craft. There is no question about these craftsman being invested in the correct use of their creations. Fëanor, Babbage, and Turing took their imaginative ideas and techniques and made them into a reality. Even so, the next generation of developers would use these products cavalierly.

## **The History of the Use of the *Palantíri* and Social Media**

Gandalf describes how the *palantíri* were used by the men of Gondor: “To see far off, and to converse in thought with one another [...]. In that way they long guarded and united the realm of Gondor” (*TT* 203). However, the use of the stones diminished in dignity with time. The height of that dignity was in the era of their creation and use by Fëanor during the First Age of Middle-earth, when they were extraordinary objects generated from the imagination and craft of an exceptional being. Thus, it is a step down for the stones to be gifts to the faithful men of Númenor by Gil-galad, the last of the Elvin Kings, to honor them for their loyalty and aid in battle against Morgoth. No harm is apparent in the centuries of use of the *palantíri* by the men of Gondor to protect their lands. Yet, the stones were diminished in dignity because they changed from being an extension of the imagination and craft of a “subtle mind” and a “most skilled hand” to being a device of technology used by persons without the insight necessary to understand and be worthy of their use. A distinction of the value of each use can be made. First, they were the product of Fëanor’s imagination and craft that has moral value because it looks outside of himself to the larger world. Afterwards, their use by the men of Gondor was a diminishment because these men did not have that same outward-looking imagination and craft. Theirs was a self-serving inward glance through the stones as a technology of military defense. Later, there was no social service done by sorcerer or wizard since they used the stones as tools for the domination of others. Their lowest uses occurred at the end of the Third Age of Middle-earth when one stone was used by a sorcerer and another by a corrupt and undisciplined wizard, each using them in dangerous and disastrous ways (*TT* 203). Eventually, the sorcerer used his stone not only for gathering information, but also for ensnaring other users of the *palantíri* to further his ambitions to dominate Middle-earth (*TT* 203-04). By the end of the story, the *palantíri* stones became a connecting

device between an unseen manipulator and, for the most part, hapless victims, unaware of the extent they expose themselves to danger until it is too late.

For the comparisons to be made in this study, it is useful to also view the history of the use of the Internet and social media. The Internet, originally known as ARPANET, began during the 1960s as the project of a handful of American research universities and military contractors connected through telephone lines. The Cold War heightened concerns that the United States was vulnerable if key cities were destroyed during a nuclear attack. The Net was devised with the invention of packet switching, the brainchild of computer engineer Paul Baran, which is the method of breaking information up and then re-assembling it using routers, so that military installations could continue to communicate with each other in case a nuclear war wiped out some, but not all, of America's cities (Moschovitis et al. 31).

Use of the Internet, like that of the *palantiri*, changed over time. The technology invented by engineers with the discipline and skill to create and to understand these remarkable devices devolved from the imaginative inventions of mathematicians, who wanted a technological way of doing long but accurate calculations for science and commerce, to military use, before they were finally made into a commercial product—including a marketplace of commercial websites, public databases, and, perhaps most significantly, social media. These products are promoted by sharp-eyed entrepreneurs who blithely manipulate these powerful tools for their own gain.

Users of social media are both the customers and the product. Empowered by easy access and friendly network interfaces, people generate countless personalized web pages and connect with other members without needing the discipline to understand how the pages are produced, much less what the personal cost of using the technology is. In return, many individuals carelessly give away private information, either directly or indirectly, through their online interactions but remain all the time oblivious to the consequences of using the technology without discrimination (Duhigg 180-97). As users participate in social media, they leave electronic markers that enable marketing targeted specifically at them. Those seemingly random advertisements are chosen by the system based upon the user's profile and interests. More is going on than providing a user-friendly place where members can post messages, pictures, and videos to share. All social media harvest information from the moment the user signs in, through each interaction, until the user logs off (Mattioli A1-A2). During that time, the media platform makes

suggestions that will lure the user to remain online as long as possible. Suggestions range from recommendations for making new friends, playing games, and trying social media's many features—all available to the user by providing the Internet's best currency, i.e., customer preferences and more private information for the data-mining algorithms to work with (Duhigg 180-97). Taking advantage of the fundamental human need to connect with others, these electronic tempters often prove to be irresistibly persuasive. They are worthy digital copies of the most heavy-handed social organizers. All of this information—from pictures of the member's latest vacation or misadventures while drinking to preferences in activities, opinions, and intimate relationships—seems hauntingly similar to the role of the *palantíri* stones in *The Lord of the Rings*. The *palantíri* ensnared the people of Middle-earth by providing nostalgic views of lost homelands, tantalizing depictions of other lives, and distorted and biased information about current events, all actions echoing the role of social media in the twenty-first century.

### **Tolkien's General Mistrust of Technology**

Tolkien could not have foreseen the intrusion of social media on human interaction, but he did express a mistrust of technology in his writing throughout his life. In *Tolkien: A Biography*, there is a scene with George Sayer that describes Tolkien's first encounter with a tape recorder (which he came to like and use later on): “[H]e pretended to regard Sayer's machine with great suspicion, pronouncing the Lord's Prayer in Gothic into the microphone to cast out any devils that might be lurking within” (Carpenter 213). To whatever degree he was serious or joking, the account represents Tolkien's suspicion of technology as described throughout Carpenter's biography. Carpenter writes that “man's destruction of the landscape moved him to profound anger” (124). He quotes entries from Tolkien's journal describing Tolkien's grief at observing the destruction of his home town by the advent of mechanization and industrialization: Tolkien writes about “the pangs to me of passing through Hall Green [which had] become a huge tram-ridden meaningless suburb”; seeing “what is left of beloved lanes of childhood, and past the very gate of our cottage, now in the midst of a sea of new red-brick” (124-25); lamenting that “where the bluebell lane ran down into the mill lane, is now a dangerous crossing alive with motors and red lights” (125); and finding a house replaced with a “petrol station” (125). Carpenter comments that Tolkien “was similarly sensitive to the damage that was inflicted on the



Oxfordshire countryside by the construction of wartime aerodromes and the ‘improvement’ of roads” (125).

The grief Tolkien felt over his experience of the destruction of places he knew recall the feelings of the hobbits in “The Scouring of the Shire” on their return to their beloved homeland to find it dominated by a smoking brick mill and the architecturally beautiful homes pulled down to be replaced with ugly tenements. The home of the hobbits is turned into an alien landscape for all of them (*RK* 283, 292-93). Indeed, the Miller’s son, Ted Sandyman, is the community’s technologist, who allies himself with Saruman to carry out the fallen wizard’s revenge against all Hobbits for the role Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin played in Saruman’s defeat and humiliation. Tolkien writes,

Take Sandyman’s mill now. Pimple knocked it down. [...] Then he brought in a lot o’ dirty-looking Men to build a bigger one and fill it full o’ wheels and outlandish contraptions. Only that fool Ted was pleased by that, and he works there cleaning wheels for the Men, where his dad was the Miller and his own master. (*RK* 292)

Sandyman turned against his own people, and the harm done is irrelevant to him as he is seduced by the honeyed words of the fallen wizard and his servant. He can be seen as a middleman equivalent to the data-mining professionals who gather information and provide analysis aiding Facebook or other clients to manipulate the behavior of members, including the purchase of their clients’ products. Similarly, in Tolkien’s story *Farmer Giles of Ham*, the miller is seen as a rival of the hero. By the end of the tale the miller loses in his petty efforts to undo Farmer Giles. The hero becomes king, and the miller’s station in life is reduced when the new king “made milling a royal monopoly” [and] “the miller became an obsequious servant of the crown” (152). Putting millers in their place, as representatives of technologists, appears to have been a long-standing fantasy of Tolkien’s since it reappears in more than one of his works.

In his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien disdainfully describes a clerk’s overheard remark that he was looking forward to the arrival of new factories near Oxford because it would “bring the University into contact with real life” (132). Tolkien continues with his objection that factories and cars are not more real than the clouds of the sky and provides a number of examples of mechanized technologies he does not like. He ends with the statement: “They [science fiction writers] may abandon the ‘full Victorian panoply’ for loose garments (with zip-fasteners), but will use this freedom mainly, it would appear, in order to play with mechanical toys in the soon-cloying game of moving at high speed” (133). An

obsession with game-playing and doing things quickly do characterize the current use of computers on the World Wide Web.

Tolkien also critiques the destructive use of technology in *The Hobbit*. He writes of the Goblins,

It is not unlikely that they invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once, for wheels and engines and explosions always delighted them, and also not working with their own hands more than they could help; but in those days and those wild parts they had not advanced (as it is called) so far. (58-59)

A similar point is made about Orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*. Early in *The Two Towers* the man Aragorn, the elf Legolas, and the dwarf Gimli easily track a company of orcs who have taken their friends, the young hobbits, captive. Legolas is astonished by the swath of destruction the orcs leave behind while on the march. He says, “No other folk make such a trampling. [...] It seems their delight to slash and beat down growing things that are not even in their way” (*TT* 22). The needless hurt doled out by the orcs is further developed in their destructive use of technology, which dramatizes the moral vacuum of these creatures. A little later in the story, the ent Treebeard describes the ruinous behavior of the orcs that he has witnessed to Merry and Pippin: “Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot—orc-mischief that; but most are hewn up and carried off to feed the fires of Orthanc” (*TT* 77). Once roused to action, Treebeard explains to the hobbits what has raised their ire: “It is the orc-work, the wanton hewing—*rárum*—without even the bad excuse of feeding the fires, that has so angered us; and the treachery of a neighbour, who should have helped us” (*TT* 89).

In his defense of “fantasy” in “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien weaves in his objection to the technology of his time. He rejects the term “escapism” used by critics to describe fantasy as a form of weakness or lack of moral fiber and uses instead the analogy of an imprisoned man who must not be thought of as weak for spending his time thinking and talking about the world outside the prison. That place unseen by him is still real, and it is healthy and essential to his survival to think and talk about it. On the other hand, the products of factories and technologies such as automobiles and airplanes are less real than nature or the denizens of fantasy stories who, because they are grounded in spiritual and eternal truth, are more connected with the real world than the distractions of technology (131-32).

## Technology and Magic vs. Fairy Tale Enchantment

In his writing, Tolkien repeatedly lumped together the ambitious or cavalier use of technology and magic as two symptoms of the same disease. A perusal of *The Silmarillion* and the many drafts of stories found in *The History of Middle-earth* shows that a good portion of the suffering throughout the history of that fantasy world can be attributed—through generation after generation of Elves, Men, Dwarves, and Wizards—to pride and a lust for the headlong pursuit of magical and mechanical empowerment. For instance, in a 1954 letter to the manager of an Oxford bookstore, Tolkien described Sauron’s influence over some elves at the beginning of the Second Age as partly due to his beauty and partly to the “knowledge that Sauron genuinely had” (*Letters* 190), which the elves wanted, despite the “warnings of Gilgalad and Elrond” (190). Also, there are statements about the elves in the same letter that implicate them in the love of technology. Tolkien writes that the “Noldor or Loremasters, were always on the side of ‘science and technology’, as we should call it” (190) and that “[t]he particular ‘desire’ of the Eregion Elves—[is] an ‘allegory’ if you like of a love of machinery, and technical devices” (190). Here, Tolkien is not making a generalization about Elves and is not inferring that “science and technology” is a good thing; he was describing an unusual time when some ambitious and unwary elves were led astray by Sauron. These statements are contrary to the positive, perceptive, and imaginative craft characteristic of elfin ways of performing work and making things.

These concerns in Tolkien’s work are not mere accidental similarities to those in this world. Tolkien’s warning against the dangers of technology resonates with truth, which has been confirmed by post–WW II history to the present. In a 1947 letter to Sir Stanley Unwin, his publisher, Tolkien described how an allegory about the disastrous results of any attempt to defeat evil using “magical or mechanical” devices is a reflection of the world humans live in. The following passage shows that Tolkien believed this theme to be both significant for all mankind and central to the foundation of his subcreation:

Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth. So that the only perfectly consistent allegory is a real life; and the only fully intelligible story is an allegory. [...] You can make the Ring into an allegory of our own time, if you like: an allegory of the inevitable fate that waits for all attempts to defeat evil power by power. But that is only because all power magical or mechanical does always so work. (*Letters* 121)

For Tolkien, magic is normally evil and a tool of domination by the user. His understanding of this kind of magic becomes clearer when he distinguishes it in “On Fairy-Stories” from “eleven magic” or “fantasy” and “enchantment”:

Magic should be reserved for the operations of the Magician. [...] [B]ut the more potent and specially elvish craft I will for lack of a less debatable word, call Enchantment. Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose. Magic produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World. It does not matter by whom it is said to be practiced, fay or mortal, it remains distinct from the other two; it is not an art but a technique; its desire is power in this world, domination of things and wills. (126)

Therefore, when Tolkien describes the authorship of fairy tales as a kind of elven “magic,” he means that the author is creating an enchantment for the reader to suspend his or her belief within the context of the story. It is “magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician” (“On Fairy-Stories” 101). The purpose of this enchantment is to point the reader’s imagination to a reality beyond mundane life. Once that is imagined, then the reader is in the mental space to see a true spirituality in the Primary World. The fairy story becomes an instrument for seeing like a telescope or a microscope. Each of these two instruments help the user to view parts of reality with very specific parameters, very distant or very small physical objects, respectively. The human eye alone is inadequate to the task, but one would not expect to be able to look at all of reality with either instrument for daily viewing. While the telescope and microscope show perspectives of the physical world that are inaccessible to the unaided eye, the fairy tale is the instrument for temporarily viewing ultimate truths clearly, as through a “clean” window (129), and for exploring attributes of those truths.

However, sometimes this distinction between magic and enchantment is blurry, and the reason why men use the word “magic” to refer to both the marvelous creations of the Elves and the similar but destructive activities of evil beings is not understood by Galadriel. In “The Mirror of Galadriel” chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien dramatically explores the difference and the confusion between the Noldorin understanding of Galadriel’s “seeing” mirror and the magic of enemy magicians. The character Galadriel, an elven queen, expresses her dismay and bewilderment about the use of the word “magic” by Men,

Hobbits, and Dwarves: “For this is what your folk would call magic, I believe; though I do not understand clearly what they mean; and they seem also to use the same word of the deceits of the Enemy. But this, if you will, is the magic of Galadriel.” With the nuance beyond her comprehension, Galadriel is only able to instruct Sam Gamgee that there is a distinction between the craft of the Elves and the equally amazing “deceits of the Enemy” even though both are named “magic” by Men, Hobbits, and Dwarves. In his simplicity, Sam, who represents humanity at its best, desires to see a marvel and accepts Galadriel’s offer and instruction. She concludes with an ironic use of the word under scrutiny: “But this, if you will, is the magic of Galadriel. Did you not say that you wished to see Elf-magic?” (377). Shown here is Galadriel’s instruction to a receptive and worthy mind—that there is a difference between “Elf-magic” (or enchantment) and the powers of Sauron and his allies (enemy magic)—although she does not understand how the two disciplines can be named with the same word. Sam’s vision in the mirror, which nearly turns him from his quest, also illustrates Tolkien’s understanding of the dangers of enchantment if misunderstood. Only Sam’s love of his master and the assurances of Galadriel fortify him to “go home by the long road with Mr. Frodo, or not at all” (*TT* 378). Galadriel warns Sam: “[T]he Mirror shows many things, and not all have yet come to pass. Some never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn aside from their path to prevent them. The Mirror is dangerous as a guide of deeds” (378). The Mirror leaves a light footprint in the magical environment, as contemporaries would call it in the real world, and as she says, a viewer must have discipline when interpreting what will be seen in order to prevent destructive consequences (378).

A “light footprint” is the opposite of the powers that commit harm by dominating others or destroying the physical environment. Galadriel’s magic is a form of wisdom that does no harm. She contrasts her skill with that of sorcerers and misguided wizards that are harmful to people and to nature. Here, Tolkien seems to be following the distinction between *magia* and *goeteia*, initially made by C. S. Lewis, friend and fellow Inklings, in *That Hideous Strength* (285-86) and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (8-12). In his exploration of these two terms, Tom Shippey defines *magia* as the positive form of skill or wisdom that produces effect without harm because the practitioner is in union with the nature he influences. In contrast, *goeteia* is the magic of the magician who is concerned only with dominating others and nature so that the harm to both are inconsequential to him or her (29-32). Shippey reminds the reader that since Tolkien was a member of the Inklings, who discussed the

distinction between *magia* and *goeteia* (31)—the latter term being an obscure word probably first revived by Charles Williams—Tolkien was familiar with these terms and the difference between them (36).

A perusal of post-WW II history shows how militaries all over the world scrambled to seek technologies to dominate the enemy—a type of technology as *goeteian* magic. In fact, the Cold War, fed by the threat of nuclear exchange by the Super Powers, resulted in the proliferation of nuclear missiles. In the twenty-first century, new technologies are being developed to find and track enemies remotely, including ground-level devices that can sense sound and heat through walls and satellites that are able to focus upon any place on the planet with amazing detail. Drones have been used for reconnaissance and to strike enemies, especially in urban areas, as the logical next step in the trend of dominating the enemy using remote technology. Destruction caused by nuclear technology is so long-lasting that some places, such as Chernobyl and testing grounds all over the world, are much like the land of Mordor, and some will never be healed. In the real world, damage is caused by radiation, in the fantasy world by poisons resulting from the mischief of Sauron. The invention and threat of the use of nuclear weapons led to a stalemate of hostility lasting decades. This is the kind of consequence Tolkien referred to in the letter to his publisher mentioned above: “You can make the Ring into an allegory of our own time, if you like: an allegory of the inevitable fate that waits for all attempts to defeat evil power by power. But that is only because all power magical or mechanical does always so work” (*Letters* 121). It can be projected that the loss of privacy resulting from the widespread use of digital and remote technology will end in similar ways that are harmful to everyone, with the possibility of being surgically “bombed” at any moment, or “poked” by the Dark Lord. Tolkien was prophetic in his descriptions of how using technology for dominion over others always ends in disaster.

### **Being “Poked” by the Dark Lord: The Ensnaring Power of the *Palantíri* and Social Media**

The ensnaring power of the *palantíri* stones parallels the power of today’s social media. On FaceBook “Poke” is an option activated with the icon of a hand poking with its finger, which resembles the White Hand emblem of Saruman, actually. A user designates who is to be poked, and that member will be notified of being “poked.” No message or further effort is conveyed by the member doing the poking. The feature appears innocuous. It allows users to remind each other of their presence even

when they have nothing to say. The official definition found on the Facebook Help center follows: “People poke their friends or friends of friends on Facebook for a lot of reasons (ex: just saying hello, getting their attention). When you poke someone, they’ll receive a notification” (“Poke” n. pag.).

The reader of *The Lord of the Rings* sees the same thing enacted, first by Sauron and then by Saruman, as they use empowering objects built by a genius of an earlier time. An assessment of the diminished power of the Wizards is expressed by the hobbit Merry regarding Saruman: “His wizardry may have been falling off lately, of course; but anyway I think he has not much grit, not much plain courage alone in a tight place without a lot of slaves and machines and things, if you know what I mean. Very different from old Gandalf” (*TT* 172). Aragorn corrects Merry’s statement because it oversimplifies the scope of Saruman’s power and the nature of his being. But, significantly, it is a hobbit, the humblest of the children of Ilúvatar, who could see the connection between the corruption of a wizard and his uncharacteristic reliance upon mechanical technology.

The wizard diminished his talents by using them in a power grab that even the non-human Treebeard could see, despite being removed from the affairs of mankind: “He is plotting to become a Power. He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment” (*TT* 76). Entrepreneurs of social media do the same self-serving acts as they gather information through online activities and then use it to unleash a tidal wave of personalized marketing on the unwary user of social media. The use of algorithms designed to lure and then keep users logged on amounts to a power grab. These entrepreneurs appear to have little interest in fulfilling any social responsibility that ought to go with the colossal success and leadership that they enjoy within their industry.

The ensnarement of a “user” by an object of power can be seen in the uncharacteristic connivance Pippin resorted to in order to take the *palantíri* called the Orthanc stone. It is not known what Pippin expected to see as he shamefully crouched down to look into the object, but he gave up far more than he expected to receive in return for his secret glimpse (*TT* 196-97). The reader knows he was drawn by the influence of the stone before he looked into it. Tolkien writes, “Then there came a faint glow and stir in the heart of it, and it held his eyes, so that now he could not look away” (*TT* 197). This could describe a real-world person viewing a computer monitor and being drawn in by social media. Pippin describes his experience: “And I wanted to go away, but I couldn’t. And then he came and questioned me; and he looked at me, and, and that is all I

remember” (*TT* 198). The flashiness of computer technology, and especially that of the Internet, has always had a similar attraction for many people.

Surely, Pippin’s experience when he looked into the Orthanc stone counts as the *goeteian* version of Sauron’s effecting a highly charged and destructive rendition of “poking” a defenseless *palantír* user. The following is a description of Pippin after the incident:

[H]is lips moved soundlessly for a while. Then with a strangled cry he fell back and lay still. The cry was piercing. [...] [T]he hobbit was lying on his back rigid, with unseeing eyes staring up at the sky. [...] The hobbit shuddered. His eyes closed. He cried out; and sat up, staring in bewilderment at all the faces round him, pale in the moonlight. (*TT* 197-98)

Though dazed and physically knocked down, Pippin survived his brush with the sorcerer with no permanent damage. Sauron was so preoccupied with his own designs that he did not give significant attention to the hobbit. The result, interestingly, was that Sauron deceived himself in much the way he deceived or attempted to deceive every other person he interacted with through his *palantír*. It may have been that Pippin’s innocence caused Sauron’s deception to rebound upon himself, or it may be that Sauron’s own twisted nature was such that he was bound to deceive himself, thus leading to his ultimate downfall.

Not every user of social media becomes permanently addicted. And so it is in *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps the most important reason why Pippin survived his encounter with the Orthanc stone was that he approached the stone with simplicity, purity of heart, and no ambitions. Gandalf tells Pippin upon examining him:

There is no lie in your eyes, as I feared. But he did not speak long with you. A fool, but an honest fool, you remain, Peregrin Took. [...] He did not want information only: he wanted *you*, quickly, so that he could deal with you in the Dark Tower, slowly. Don’t shudder! If you will meddle in the affairs of Wizards, you must be prepared to think of such things. (*TT* 203)

Just as Pippin is meddling in the “affairs of Wizards” in the Secondary World, the vast majority of people who use social media are dabbling in a technology that was built with skills beyond their level. Even more so, a sizable number of those users do not grasp the magnitude of social media’s effects and consequences, parallel to the “affairs of Wizards” in the Secondary World. The procedure for computer programmers to meddle in the affairs of social media users begins with the latter group surrendering



their private information and swallowing the promise that significant human connectivity can be achieved through technology. This technological shortcut is largely a cheat that should give individuals pause if not make them shudder.

In *The Two Towers*, Gandalf speculated to Pippin that Saruman's pride led him to use one of the stones for viewing things from a distance. In this example of ensnarement by the *palantíri*, Saruman can be viewed more as an unwary user, than as the predator he would become, which is similar to the luring in of users with practically no computer skills and even less of an idea of the societal and personal consequences of sharing too much about themselves while using social media. Saruman's desire to see things from afar exposed him to discovery by Sauron (*TT* 203-04). Gandalf says of the sorcerer and the fallen wizard: "But there is nothing that Sauron cannot turn to evil uses. Alas for Saruman! It was his downfall, as I now perceive. Perilous to us all are the devices of an art deeper than we possess ourselves" (*TT* 203). In the end, both the sorcerer and the wizard are using the powerful objects to carry out their ambitions. They do not have the skill to discover how to create the objects themselves, like many users of the Internet, who have very little knowledge about or skill in the use of computers and the networks that connect them.

By and large, social media entrepreneurs have propped their online commercial empire upon the shoulders of computer engineering giants of the past such as Babbage and Turing. Social media require the user to share some personal information upon registering to open an account. Networks immediately begin the ongoing process of assembling a profile for the IP address of the computer being used (Mattioli A1-A2). User preferences are revealed to them by small files called "cookies." In the end, that seemingly insignificant amount of information given during the set-up of an account gives the network access to information about the private life of the user. The bargain, similar to Saruman's experience of using the Orthanc stone, includes volunteering to be cajoled and wheedled into surrendering more and more information throughout each online experience (Mattioli A1-A2), in one case by the sorcerer Sauron, and in the other by platform algorithms.

## **Being "Poked" by the Dark Lord: The Destructive Power of the *Palantíri* and Social Media**

Yet an inadvertent "poke," from a time when Sauron still had his finger, is described in *The Silmarillion*: "But the Elves were not so lightly to be

caught. As soon as Sauron set the One Ring upon his finger they were aware of him; and they knew him, and perceived that he would be master of them, and of all that they wrought. Then in anger and fear they took off their rings” (288). The text continues to explain that Sauron was wrathful upon discovering that his intentions were revealed to the elves during his use of the Ring, and he committed war against them as reprisal (288). Parallel to the power of social media platforms to dominate viewers using algorithms is another example of Sauron’s drawing in a guardian of a *palantír*, Denethor, the Steward of Gondor, who, guided by what he saw in the stone, believed there was no hope for his people or himself. The result was the loss of a remarkable man through a terrible death (*RK* 129-30). Denethor had a *palantír* from which he used to seek information to defend his country (*RK* 155). Despite Denethor’s vigilance, Sauron capitalized on his disposition and manipulated him through images of the defeat of Gondor and of personal loss. He made Gondor appear frail and the Steward helpless. In the following passage, Denethor reveals his stone to Gandalf:

Then coming to the doorway he [Denethor] drew aside the covering, and lo! he had between his hands a *palantír*. [...]

[...] “All the East is moving. And even now the wind of thy hope cheats thee and wafts up Anduin a fleet with black sails. The West has failed. It is time for all to depart who would not be slaves.”

“Such counsels will make the Enemy’s victory certain indeed,” said Gandalf.

“Hope on then!” laughed Denethor. (*RK* 129)

Denethor had no way of knowing that the black sails he saw were commanded by Aragorn and would lead to victory for the Steward of Gondor’s people. Gandalf’s describes how Denethor came to despair:

“The Stones of Seeing do not lie, and not even the Lord of Barad-dûr can make them do so. He can, maybe, by his will choose what things shall be seen by weaker minds, or cause them to mistake the meaning of what they see. Nonetheless it cannot be doubted that when Denethor saw great forces arrayed against him in Mordor, and more still being gathered, he saw that which truly is.” (*RK* 154)

Further, Denethor’s pride was hurt when he thought he was seeing the heir of the throne alive and apparently rising to supplant him and his line (*RK* 130). He did not possess the discipline required to interpret images from a magical object, as Galadriel instructed Sam Gamgee. The pride, ambition, and insecurity of the Steward of Gondor

warped his interpretation of the *palantíri* images and blinded him to the love and loyalty of his son, people, and allies. In his state of mind, he could not conceive that Aragorn would claim his birthright to vast regions of Middle-earth with no intention of supplanting Denethor's line as Stewards of Gondor (RK 245). Unaware of Sauron's manipulation, Denethor indulged in despair, self-pity, and spite. He sent Faramir, his last remaining son, on a hopeless mission, abandoned his allies in the defense of his country, and committed self-immolation. Denethor's undoing by Sauron's mischief is one of the most dramatic tragedies to come from the use of the *palantíri* in *The Lord of the Rings*. The social network version of what happens to Denethor would be cyber bullying.

Once again, similar to Sauron, the creators of social media do not merely want quick and specific information. Indeed, social media have occasionally been complicit in the outright destruction of vulnerable users (Mintz 1), as was the *palantír* in the downfall of Denethor, Steward of Gondor. Though it would be an exaggeration to say that social media want to break the user, it is true that they want to "deal" with the member "slowly" within the rules of their domain. Chris Treadaway and Mari Smith describe the history and use of personal information gathering by Facebook. The social media giant's practices to understand customer preferences arise from the goal to protect Facebook's market share against competition, as well as to provide effective advertisements for their commercial, paying clients. Treadaway and Smith describe how Facebook discovered early on that the personal information and preferences people revealed when logged in would have been a marketer's dream in an earlier time. From the beginning, Facebook has become increasingly sophisticated at enacting strategies for getting people to stay logged in, to provide more information, and even to unknowingly make revelations through their selections in each transaction, all of which are saved for analysis by the company (Treadaway and Smith 34). All of this has culminated in a program that provides values and weights to each piece of information revealed by a person using Facebook. This information is used by the program to know how often and how much time the user is spending with each transaction or with specific friends so that desired activities and friends can be offered more often in order to encourage continued log-in time (34-65). More recently, news reports have revealed that Facebook allowed scientists both inside and outside the company to manipulate users' news feeds to learn whether hiding "good" news or "bad" news affected the emotions of those users themselves (Holmes n. pag.).

Not only are the social networks designed to manipulate customers' behavior online, but cyber bullying has sometimes resulted in emotional breakdowns and suicide. One victim of cyber-bullying was Nicola Brookes, who was slandered on Facebook when sharing her favorite contestant on a television talent competition. Facebook refused to identify Brookes' tormentors. Unlike the story of Denethor, remote prodding did not cause her to give up. She took Facebook to court, and the judge ordered Facebook to reveal who the bullies were. Most cases do not end as happily (Halliday n. pag.). Facebook has since taken a stronger stand against cyber bullying; however, the company cannot claim ignorance of the power to humiliate online. After all, before he founded Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg had hacked into private websites of Harvard student houses and lifted students' photos and identifications for his own public website, inviting users to vote on the students' attractiveness. He narrowly avoided being expelled from Harvard (Kaplan n. pag.).

## Conclusion

A study of the parallels between the *palantíri* in Tolkien's work and Internet technology in this world, especially social media, shows that both are used for information gathering and communication from afar. In both cases, the user approaches a seemingly infinite and rich vision of a world through a globe or screen. Neither the *palantíri* nor social media are inherently evil, but both have behind-the-scenes manipulators interested only in their own gain, even at the expense of the user. Also, the magical and digital visions can be addictive for naive or careless personalities. Users are attracted to the object itself and then manipulated by invisible forces, be they corporations or a power-hungry sorcerer. But this addiction, to the stones or the Internet, does not deliver satisfying results. Connection between characters in the Tolkienian stories or humans in this world cannot be manufactured or extracted from stone or machine. The only way to have connections of value begins with person-to-person interaction through live activities. This is why users of the Internet need to have realistic expectations about the connectedness they can get through social media, which is typically friendship in name only. Each provider is a commercial platform that feeds on the desire for human connection. Social media and the *palantíri* stones necessarily fail to deliver on their promise because neither can bring people together for true fellowship. The stones used by the men of Gondor to protect their vast realms appear to be

contributing to a sociability and mutual interest of individuals through communicating and news gathering. However, these connections are actually built upon pre-existing relationships or alliances. The main point of their use at that time was the convenient exchange of military information and not a typically social or frivolous activity such as the use of social media. By the time of the Third Age, in which *The Lord of the Rings* takes place, the stones had ceased to be used purely for the good of the people. Sauron uses a stone to gather information to diminish or dominate other users. It is difficult to know if the use of the stone by the wizard Saruman was ever innocent. The reader knows he did not use the Orthanc stone to make friends and that his desire to see things from afar was for personal gain, not in the interest of others. Nonetheless, the result was that he was captured in the worst possible way. Though Denethor used his stone to gather information to protect his kingdom, the act was solitary despite the influence of Sauron. Although he did not turn to Sauron for friendship or advice, he was not strong enough to prevent the images in the stone from misleading him to despair. In the end, Denethor's use of the stone did not contribute to developing relationships but actually caused him to be even more isolated.

To avoid being “poked” by the Dark Lord—i.e., attract a predator who will attempt to do harm—as seen in Tolkien's fiction and as happens in this world—the stones and social media must be used without a Dark Lord's ambition of dominating others and without the user's volunteering to be influenced by the Dark Lord. Discipline is needed for the safe use of both the *palantíri* in the Secondary World and social media in the Primary World, although, remarkably, *The Lord of the Rings* has an exaggerated version of the “poke” feature of the social media giant Facebook. Discussed above is a description of the painful and frightening outcome of Pippin's use of a stone. In chapter 7 of *The Fellowship of the Rings* Frodo and Sam are given the opportunity to see Elf-magic at the hands of Galadriel. In this moment she warns them about the dangers of making life-changing decisions based upon what they saw in the enchanted pool. A similar warning could be made to users of social media. Evaluating information found on the Internet is a skill necessary to keep people from being taken advantage of both commercially or personally. (See Rozema's essay, this volume, on this same point.) One's intentions and disposition will contribute to one's experiences while using social media. Also, one must be disciplined in interpreting images seen through the “magical” stones or social media. As Galadriel warns, “The Mirror is dangerous as a guide of deeds” (*FR* 378). The Internet, like the stones and the mirror, also delivers only two-dimensional images with limited context for evaluating

what is seen. The *palantíri* of Tolkien speak clearly to the modern technological world: Individuals should never place their lives in jeopardy for the promise of something that briefly seems desirable.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Jason Fisher, Mark R. Hall, and Salwa Khoddam for their insightful comments for improving this paper. And to Jason Dean Henderson for the subtitle.

<sup>2</sup> This paper was read at the 16th Annual CSLIS Conference at LeTourneau University, Longview, Texas, March 21-23, 2013.

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