

The internet 18545 essay



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Introduction

The Internet has received a great deal of attention recently as consumers, analysts and even government officials see it as the coming way that Americans will not only do business, but also shop, communicate and receive entertainment. From a small, geographically dispersed group of users only a decade ago, the Internet has added millions of users in the past years. Internet users remain geographically dispersed, but their ranks are no longer limited to government employees or scholars. Like companies or organizations which experience such rapid growth, the growth of the Internet has not been without its difficulties. However, the Internet is not the creation of any one company or organization, but rather incorporates many different offerings from a broad variety of companies, groups, and individuals. This paper will examine the Internet and focuses on the negative aspects of the Internet on both an individual and societal level, including increased isolation of individuals and increased economic costs to society. Included also is an evaluation of the supposed benefits of the Internet and whether those are benefits to society or whether these benefits may actually withhold negative effects.

The Technology of the Internet

The Internet encompasses the World Wide Web (Web), file transfer protocol sites (FTPs), newsgroups (electronic bulletin boards) and gopher sites (often used for government sites and one of the first widely used ways of accessing the Internet) (Stoll

43). Taken as a whole, the “ Internet” demonstrates the interconnectivity of computers, information services and electronic mail services. From a single computer terminal or personal computer, individuals on the information superhighway are able to connect to a variety of other electronic resources for entertainment, information, or to conduct business; most of these connections take place over telephone lines (Allen 1). Today, most users do not consider connectivity costs which once prohibited heavy use of the Internet; such costs are typically instigated by companies or subsidized by the government through educational institutions (Stoll 19). Even in those situations where individuals pay for connecting to the Internet, there may be a flat-rate subsidized by advertising paid to the company providing the connection.

The telephone system that connects the world was originally developed to enable people to talk with other people not in the same physical location. This service was offered by companies who saw the service as a way to generate revenue and make a profit. Facsimile machines made it possible for machines to communicate with machines, but the printed word was still the medium of choice. The computer age also introduced the use of telephone lines to send bits of data, although voice and data generally traveled separately. Recently, fiber-optic technology has advanced to the point that it can now be economically implemented across wide geographic areas. More efficient at carrying the so-called “ broadband” data that video images require, and more reliable for transmitting traditional data across phone lines, the proliferation of fiber-optic networks led to the merging of communications and computers (Allen 2).

Uses of the Internet

The potential to bring together large numbers of people through a single electronic connection has certainly captured the attention of business, which is one of the driving forces behind developing the Internet. Already, business has begun to reap the benefits of the so-called information superhighway through such technologies as electronic data interchange (EDI), bar coding, imaging and smart cards. These networks combine telecommunication facilities with electronic mail, and offer 24 hour a day service to worldwide participants. There is generally a high degrees of fault tolerance within these networks, which may offer nonstop configuration of software along with low maintenance, as well (Lisanti 13).

Federal Express has one of the most extensive customer service sites on the World Wide Web. From the home page, users can choose to track packages anywhere in the world, find a local drop off point (and the last time for pickup) or download free software from FedEx designed to help their customers (and prospective customers) use FedEx now and in the future. The site uses bold graphics to guide users through actions with easily recognizable icons, and reinforces the image of the company as a state-of-the-art organization which is interested not only in getting packages delivered to their destinations on time, but also as a company which is dedicated to help its customers succeed (" Virtual Shopping" 31).

The company's decision to offer free software and on-line package tracking may, at first, seem ironic since FedEx could certainly charge for these services. However, the company already operates a toll-free information line

which customers can call to track packages; the Internet merely offers customers another way to obtain the same information. In fact, FedEx may well be saving money because it may be able to hire fewer phone operators since customers can access the Internet and the appropriate FedEx database 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and have their questions answered without human intervention ("Virtual Shopping" 31). Certainly this downsizing has a negative effect on the former FedEx employees no longer needed because of the highly effective Web site.

FedEx is an interesting company to consider when examining the use of the Internet because it is a company which has developed (some say created) demand for overnight delivery services. FedEx built its business by convincing consumers (mainly business consumers) that it was no longer efficient to send a letter which might take a week to travel across the country. Instead, according to FedEx, there are certain documents which "absolutely, positively" have to be at their destination overnight ("Virtual Shopping" 31). Having helped to create this need, FedEx then found itself competing against facsimile machines, which decreased the amount of time to send a document from overnight to a few minutes. E-mail, Usegroups and the Web now make it possible to send documents (ideally) within a few seconds. FedEx continues to have a strong overnight delivery service, for bulkier documents, parcels and when originals have to be sent, but certainly the Internet poses a serious threat to its long-term success. However, FedEx takes full advantage of the new technology by enabling customers to check on the progress of any delivery at any hour of the day or night.

Negative Aspects at the Individual Level

Negative aspects of the Internet appear at both the personal and the societal level. At the personal level, these negative impacts include loss of privacy, psychological dependence and increased isolation.

Loss of Privacy

The issue of confidentiality is perhaps the greatest issue with regard to the information superhighway. Since the Internet and its electronic mail access is one of the most commonly used features of the information superhighway, it is one area which receives a great deal of attention. Ironically, one of the nation's premier on-line services, Prodigy, requires new employees to sign a waiver indicating that they recognize that Internet access is provided for business purposes only, and that mail messages may be read by other individuals within the organization (Gonzalez 152). In fact, many users of electronic mail assume that the mail messages are private, just as mail delivered by the United States Postal Service is private. However, American courts have ruled that employers can regularly screen electronic mail messages, and that information contained in those messages is not private and can be used as the basis for a variety of lawsuits (Martinez 74).

Privacy issues extend well beyond companies reading

employees' e-mail. Through the use of "cookies," or pieces of software which are attached to machines, on-lines services and others can track who visits which Web sites. Some companies require visitors to register on the

site before they are permitted access; this information is used for direct marketing later on. It is possible for

companies to track what types of marketing preferences a particular consumer has based on their Web visits and also the purchases made at particular sites (Rothschild 28).

Psychological Dependence

Internet addiction has gained media attention as the Internet itself has gained widespread acceptance in the United States. The problem is compared to alcoholism and gambling addiction in terms of the cost to individuals and their families, and even to employers as their employees “surf” the net on company time. While evidence is largely anecdotal, there is increased focus and some serious study being done to determine the level of psychological dependence which can develop among some Internet users (Stephen 26).

Increased Isolation

While the issue of Internet addiction is a somewhat controversial one and an issue which has not yet been fully examined, there is increasing evidence that even casual Internet use can lead to increased isolation among users (Greene 78). The paradox is that while the Internet provides connectivity to the world, that connectivity results in a lack of personal contact. Individuals who communicate through e-mail do so through the isolation of the computer, focused on typing (or speaking) their messages into a computer keyboard or terminal. The Internet is also an anonymous medium (although

this is starting to change) so that a 50-year old white male can take on the character of a 22? year old black female for one chat or e-mail session, then a completely different character for another. His correspondents, on the other hand, have no real indication of the person with whom they are communicating. Body language and other visual clues are also lost on the Internet, as are speech intonation and additional clues which offer hints in non? Internet social interaction.

Current estimates put the number American Internet connections at more than 116 million by 2002 (that includes multiple connections for one individual, such as those who have access both at home and at work). Researchers estimate that five to ten percent of these are at? risk for Internet addiction (Greene 78). The issue of Internet addiction is controversial, with some research projects supporting the concept while other analysts consider Internet addiction to be overblown. What is generally accepted is that there are individuals who have difficulty disconnecting their on-line connection and who are willing to sacrifice their financial well-being, their personal relationships and their jobs in order to communicate on? line.

Internet addiction is characterized by individuals spending more time on-line than they want to (by their admission), and allowing their work (scholastic or professional) to suffer. Students have been known to become addicted to multi-user dimension (MUD) games to the point that they are unwilling (or unable, according to addiction advocates) to disconnect from the computer. Employees have been fired from their jobs after spending too much time on the Internet for non? job? related purposes; in at least one case, an employee was fired after approaching the Employee Assistance Program

(EAP) for help with her Internet addiction (the EAP did not recognize Internet addiction as a “ real” disorder). The anonymity and lack of consequence associated with social interaction on the Internet makes it an attractive medium for individuals who have difficulty expressing themselves in personal relationships of a traditional nature. The anonymity allowed by the Internet allows individuals to assume different identities and play-act in newsgroups or in e-mail. This is a difficult basis on which to form meaningful relationships. Even when users do not misrepresent their personal histories (such as gender or age), the Internet makes it possible to “ say” things to someone else without worrying about social niceties. Through Usenet and e-mail, one individual can “ flame” another (issue a vitriolic statement) and never read any of the responses. Certainly this is not the case in a face-to-face conversation (Dries 20).

Negative Aspects at the Societal Level

At the societal level, there are considerable negative impacts associated with the Internet. Although the Internet is promoted as a way to extend democracy to the disenfranchised world, there is evidence that it instead will work

to extend the gap between the ‘ haves’ and the ‘ have-nots.’ Employees who lack technical skills will be laid off in favor of those who have the requisite education, increasing the number of marginally? employed individuals.

Misinformation will become more accessible and harder to distinguish as biased or simply inaccurate because it will have the issues of legitimate sources. The government, working in the “ best interests” of children and

citizens, will try to control the Internet and will most likely succeed only in eroding even more individual rights.

The Myth of Universal Access

Although the Internet is sometimes cited as the great equalizer and the backbone of true democracy, the reality is that access to the Internet is still remarkably limited. The total number of users on-line in the United States is estimated at 50 million (both at home and at their business). While that is an impressive number, it still represents far fewer than have televisions or telephones, and access tends to be along class lines. Some Americans have access through work, home, and school; others have multiple access through these same locations. Poorer Americans are denied access even though hardware costs have dropped dramatically. The same is true throughout the world. The Internet today remains the domain of those with the income to justify not only the initial investment, but also those who have the time to dedicate to maintaining an Internet presence. Long? term, this division may result in strong class distinctions which are reinforced by the Internet its access (Classe 43).

As already noted, there are costs associated with having access to the Internet even when those costs are paid for by companies or government agencies. In the United States, most Internet connections are provided by employers or government agencies (including schools). When there is access from the home, the access is nearly always in the homes of those in the middle and upper income brackets. That's because access to the Internet requires an investment in hardware which poorer individuals simply cannot

afford. Even innovations such as WebTV, which provide access to the World Wide Web without a personal computer, require an additional investment which is out of the reach of the poorest individuals (Beauprez 1).

What is true within the borders of the United States extends to the rest of the world, as well. In the United Kingdom, for example, fewer than 10 percent of the population has an on? line connection; the figures are higher in Germany, and higher as a whole in Western Europe than in Africa (Classe 43). The Internet does not provide universal access and may well never do so. The hundreds of thousands who are unemployed and who struggle to find enough to eat on a daily basis, or who suffer from not having healthy water, and the hundreds of thousands who do not even have access to electricity, let alone phones, are not likely to consider being connected to the Internet a high priority. The Internet does not connect the “ have-nots” to the establishment, it connects the “ haves” together with other “ haves”.

Layoffs

As already mentioned, FedEx has an extensive Web site which enables customers to access information directly. This access

has resulted in a decrease in the need for customer service representatives. Just as the automated teller machines resulted in a decrease in the need for tellers in bank branches, so the Internet has the potential to re-engineer entire corporations as fewer customer representatives (and others) are needed to handle inquiries and sales.

Some analysts suggest that the reduction in workforce seen in one part of a company are compensated for in another part of the organization. While telephone operators may be laid off, this argument goes, additional Web designers and MIS personnel will be hired to help maintain the hardware and software necessary to keep the Web site operational. There is some validity to this argument, but it overlooks the fact that the employees who are laid off, the telephone operators, are unlikely to have the skills to be hired back as Web designers. It is possible, although not guaranteed, that the overall job loss nearly balances out, but the individuals affected by the emphasis on the Web site are not likely to consider this a benefit.

Loss of Priorities

FedEx and e-mail asks the question of whether it is truly necessary to send any document with such speed. American business progressed well into the twentieth century relying on more traditional methods of communication and air mail was considered a significant advance. But the relative cost of air mail meant that it was used sensibly and companies (not to mention individuals) considered carefully whether the cost was justified given the content of the message. With the beginning of overnight delivery services, even ordinary business communications began to take on importance that is not necessarily justified; this is made even more intense by the creation of the Internet.

There are inherent costs in creating and sending messages across the Internet, but these costs are hidden from users so that the Internet appears to be free (Stoll 207). Even when individuals pay for access to the Internet

through a service provider such as America On Line or CompuServe, they are not being charged for each action they complete on the network. Instead, they are charged for their connection time or, increasingly, a single charge for access to the service provider.

Just as the price of air mail caused individuals to stop and consider whether a message truly required the expense, the apparently “ free” Internet results in a lack of such consideration. Individuals and companies send thousands of messages, each arriving within seconds of when it was sent, each demanding to be acted on immediately, and each ranging in importance from news of a meeting being cancelled to the latest joke.

Availability of Misinformation

The relative ease with which information is dispersed on the Internet suggests that certainly the public is better off. However, information of questionable worth is also just as easily dispersed on the Internet. Readers of the Nation have come to understand publication’s bias and are unlikely to expect the same sort of information in that publication as in the New Republic. On the Internet, determining the particular bias of a specific author, or even determining the author, can be difficult. So-called “ urban myths” have gained particular popularity because they can be spread quickly, and many who access the Internet are not aware that they must be as careful in accepting any information from this source as they are from any other (Wetmore 6).

Misinformation can be spread through any medium, print, broadcast, or the Internet. Mainstream media companies put stories on the evening news and

in the morning newspaper which apparently are objective, but which may well be influenced, even faintly, by the company's advertisers.

Nonmainstream media has had its market for years; sometimes called the "underground" media or press, this alternative source has flourished through the use of photocopier machines and desktop publishing. Before that technology was readily available, the underground media depended on typewriters and mimeographs.

The ease with which information can be created and dispersed through the Internet means that consumers have considerably more filtering to do than in the past. Where the production values of a publication or broadcast could sometimes indicate the type of source putting out the information (public access cable channels versus network news, for example), these distinctions become more blurred on the Internet. Even amateurs can create sites, which have high "production value" and Usenet provides a soapbox for communicative alternative voices as well as noncommunicative types. The rules for evaluating sources, or even identifying them, have changed, and the Internet actually makes it easy to camouflage who is promoting what ideas. Without being able to identify the source, it can become much more difficult to evaluate its argument (Lane, 1998, p. 19).

Emphasis on Recent Information

Another negative impact of the Internet is its emphasis on current, even immediate, information. In part, this is due to the nearness of the technology itself. There is the potential that the value of historical data will be lost in favor of what is

current. This emphasis means that much information is taken out of historical context and loses some value as a result (Stoll 187).

Some of the emphasis on the recent comes from the technology itself. In the early 1990s, a 9600 baud modem was considered adequate; today, such a modem is considered exceedingly slow: 14, 400 is considered the minimum acceptable for Internet access with 28, 800 and 56, 000 baud included with most new computers. The same is true of hardware and software associated with computers. While an IBM PC built in the early 1980s most likely functions exactly as its original specifications indicate, software is no longer available for it, few computers can read its files and it is largely considered obsolete for “ real” use. Those who use computers have become accustomed to having access to the “ newest;” in the on-line world, the old simply does not work. It is no wonder that they are willing to ignore old information, or distrust that information, merely because it is older than the computer they are using.

Attempts of Government to Control the Internet

Governments around the world have struggled with the issue of how to control information on the Internet, with pornography generally being the most controversial issue. As legislators seek to protect children, there is increased debate about the role of parents and teachers, and what types of information is appropriate for the Internet (Kirchner 30). Of perhaps greater importance are the problems that arise when governments in one country try to regulate content originating in another.

In one celebrated instance, Germany is pursuing a case against CompuServe, an American company, because so-called pornographic materials were available to Germans on the Internet (Strassel B15A). CompuServe maintained that it was operating within the laws of the United States where it is based. The case is an interesting one because it points up that while Germany may object to some of the images which an American CompuServe subscriber puts on the Internet, does the German government have the right to prosecute? And does Germany have the right to dictate what someone in Japan has access to when data is distributed by an American?

Another area of concern, with regard to government control of the Internet, includes the issue of privacy and concerns on? line voting. Privacy becomes a primary consideration when evaluating the proposal that the Internet could be used for on-

line voting. In this way, individuals could vote without leaving their home or office. Those who favor this approach suggest that this would increase voter turnout, which is precariously low in elections within the United States. With on-line voting, the argument goes, individuals could use the Internet to research issues and then vote at their convenience without having to take time off work or otherwise impact their schedule (Kay & Kay 37).

The problem with using the Internet for on-line voting is how to protect against voter fraud without erasing the right to privacy and the sacredness of the secret ballot. Currently, voters sign-in at their polling place and receive a ballot which cannot be traced to their sign-in. There are no

identifying numbers on the ballot corresponding to the sign-in sheet, and even positive identification is not required. On-line voting would have to be able to ensure that voters vote only once, and on-line connections leave “footprints” regarding the activities performed on-line. There is currently no sufficient way to conduct on-line voting without the possibility that the actual votes could be discerned by the government. This is not to say that voter fraud does not currently exist, only that voting through the Internet would, in order to protect against fraud, have to sacrifice the privacy of the individuals who vote (Kay & Kay 37).

Conclusion

Amid the big hype surrounding the Internet about its being the Great Equalizer, and providing voices to those who previously have not been heard, the negative effects of the Internet have been overlooked. The very nature of the Internet increases isolation for individuals who may already lack social skills, and

there is the very real possibility that individuals can become dependent on the Internet in much the same way that individuals become addicted to gambling. The Internet also encourages the acceptance of information without questioning sources, and may well lead to a greater wearing away of privacy by private companies than the government could ever have hoped to achieve. While the media has emphasized the so-called benefits of the Internet, few individuals have taken the time to question the validity of those claims, and the time may have already passed when the critics of the Internet can be heard among the sounds of praise.

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