Innovation

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Pervasive Internet becoming a part of life

Futurist Raymond Kurzweil aptly stated that " if the automobile industry had made as much progress [as computers] in the past fifty years, a car today would cost a hundredth of a cent and go faster than the speed of light." (1999, pp. 21, 25). The pervasiveness of the Internet has been a confluence and result, and indeed also the driver, of many of the information and communication technology changes that we see today. Just like a new road links a far off farming community to a national road network, the Internet has allowed people and businesses all over the world to connect and communicate with each other at instant speeds. As an enabler of social, personal, business and information sharing interaction, Internet has had far reaching effects on the societies and individuals across the world.

Previously unimagined, Internet has allowed people to have instant online access to information including news, education, and entertainment as well as allowed communication through email. While this facility has had a notable effect on individual lives and how we communicate and do business, the real societal changes lie elsewhere.

The Internet has allowed democratisation of information where individuals and communities can now become producers in addition to being consumers of information. Domains like journalism and art, which were limited to mainstream and traditional spheres of influence, have opened up to individuals who can express and create their own identity and personal following. Social networking sites like Facebook and Youtube have given rise to new online relationships. While some of these never result in face to face

contact in person, the phenomenon has enabled connections across geographical and cultural divides based on personal preferences, interest groups and vocational interests. Several social support groups have sprung up on the webs which have particularly helped those who are either shy or unable to be part of physical groups. The ability to be anonymous on the web is an advantage here. Finally, the Internet has increasingly become home for civic and political advocacy (Lin & Atkin, 2007: p. 184). President Obama's presidential campaign depended heavily on the Internet, for example.

Is it a good thing

Tyler noted that there was nothing new about the Internet and that it merely allowed " new ways of doing old things" and did not have a social impact (Tyler, 2002). So, in essence, are the benefits or pitfalls caused by Internet indistinguishable from those we already know of? Perhaps the answer is not that straightforward. The development of hitherto unknown kind of social relationships at a large scale through online communities and sites like Facebook bring a new dimension to the idea of people meeting and knowing others who they may never meet in person. It could be argued that socially inactive individuals have been able to achieve a fulfilment and self expression online (Lin & Atkin, 2007: p. 69). Patients have found support groups online and are able to interact within them when physical interaction is a practical limitation (Katz & Rice, 2002: p. 162). The cost of education has come down drastically and it is far easier for someone in any corner of the world to enrol and study from home in a programme of choice elsewhere. This was unthinkable even 25 years ago.

Civic advocacy and involvement of the younger generation has found a home at the Internet. Students comprised a large percentage of "

Candlelight Protestors" against import of US beef in 2008 (Schwartzman, 2008). Student groups helped mobilize and organise the protests through campaigns run online.

On the other side, proliferation and easy access to pornography has been a burning issue ever since Internet became popular (Katz & Rice, 2002: p. 162). This is obviously a negative aspect and particularly so for younger users. Also, addiction to online gaming has been a cause for concern (Katz & Rice, 2002: p. 162).

On balance, however, in the opinion of this author, the Internet has been a positive influence on society and individuals. Perspectives may differ but it is felt that the negative aspects can be circumvented through family and school involvement and coaching.

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