Andrew Martin

Mrs. Halvorson

Running Start English 12

2/5/2021

Discerning Fact From Fiction: The Effects Of Internet Globalization

In August 2017, the Harvard Gazette sat down with cybersecurity expert Bruce Schnier to talk about mass surveillance, and how people can protect themselves. When the Gazette asked about his opinion on internet privacy, Schnier answered, “Customers are concerned about their privacy and don’t like companies knowing their intimate secrets. But they feel powerless and are often resigned to the privacy invasions because they do not have any real choice. People need to own credit cards, carry cellphones, and have email addresses and social media accounts. That’s what it takes to be a fully functioning human being in the early 21st century.” In its short, sixty-year lifetime, the internet has become a staple of what it means to be a modernized, even functional, person. Since the internet’s beginnings in the late 1950s, it has grown from a crude web of research computers to a lattice of globally connected devices ("Internet and Globalization."). This viral growth has stemmed from social, political, and economic sources. The social growth of the internet comes mainly from the positive feedback that people get when they interact with it ("The Social Dilemma: Social Media and Your Mental Health."). Economically, the internet has become popular because advertisement companies pay websites to keep users online to keep seeing their advertisements. Schnier notes that "Surveillance is the business model of the internet… Personalized advertising is how these companies make money and is why so much of the internet is free to users. We’re the product, not the customer” (Schneier). A final reason that the internet has become so globally widespread is for political means. Because the internet can reach so many people, some countries use the internet for malign means. China, for example, has used the internet to spread misinformation and to censor opposing opinions (” Censorship”). The world must use the internet both thoughtfully and ethically to avoid negative social, emotional, and political consequences.

One main way that the Internet negatively affects its users is socially. When Schneier mentioned how people did not have a choice about their privacy, he explained that most people are against sharing their data but that they feel they need to use the internet (Schneier). Because people have become reliant on their technology, they feel like they are forced to give up their personal information and connect constantly to the web. The services they know are compromising their privacy are simply too convenient to give up. Another harmful social effect of the internet is caused by “Fear of Missing out.” Also known by the abbreviation FOMO, the fear of missing out is another result of a connected society. When everyone else is constantly using social media and the internet, people feel like they miss out when they take a break (“The Social Dilemma: Social Media and Your Mental Health.”). This pressures many into being hyperconnected, which can quickly become mentally exhausting. Another way that technology has and will continue to affect society is by decreasing wait times. Psychologist Jaqueline Sperling says, “I think we need to take a step back and look at the role technology is playing in our society as a whole, in terms of people needing instant gratification, staying home and not interacting in the community” (“The Social Dilemma: Social Media and Your Mental Health”). Because nearly all human knowledge is a few taps or clicks away, our society has lost patience and the ability to wait for delayed gratification. This means that we lose motivation faster and are prone to give up on longer tasks. Overall, global interconnectivity has created some issues in both privacy and time management that must be carefully navigated to use the internet safely.

Another big way that the internet has affected the world has been in its political effects. One seemingly constant political effect has been tampering with elections. According to Gale, “The cyberattacks and social media disinformation campaigns launched by Russia during North American and European elections exemplify the ways the internet can be harnessed by foreign interests to influence political stability in other nations” (Internet and Globalization). Countries may be motivated to meddle in elections through the internet to either put a puppet leader into power or to cripple an election system. Some countries may also be using the internet to crush protests. "The governments of Iran, Belarus, and Thailand have imposed blocks on internet traffic to prevent reports and images of violent crackdowns on pro-democracy protesters from circulating online” (“Internet and Globalization"). However, the internet has also been used to enable protestors, such as in the 2011-2012 Arab Spring movements, as well as the recent Hong Kong protests (“Internet and Globalization"). As well as being used to misinform and quell uprisings, the internet has also been used to censor views and limit freedom of the press. "According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)…in 2019 the nations that most censor the internet were Eritrea, North Korea, Turkmenistan, Saudi Arabia, and China” ("Internet and Globalization."). Because so many countries abuse their power to stay in control, people need to train themselves to recognize propaganda so that they can stand up to it.

A third way that global interconnectivity has affected the globe is through its massive emotional power. “A 2018 British study tied social media use to decreased, disrupted, and delayed sleep, which is associated with depression, memory loss, and poor academic performance…Researchers know the connection between the mind and the gut can turn anxiety and depression into nausea, headaches, muscle tension, and tremors” (The Social Dilemma: Social Media and Your Mental Health”). Misuse of social media can cause emotional duress that manifests itself in the form of physical damage. One emotional effect that relates to recent events is remote learning. Because teachers cannot help each student when they are working remotely, they may begin to slip in their academics, leading to a feedback loop of lower motivation and grades (Stringer). When students get lower grades than they are used to, they may feel a drop in self-confidence. A final way that the internet affects people’s emotions is through comparisons. “When reviewing others’ social activity, people tend to make comparisons such as, ‘Did I get as many likes as someone else?’…They’re searching for validation on the internet that serves as a replacement for meaningful connection they might otherwise make in real life” (“The Social Dilemma: Social Media and Your Mental Health.”). These comparisons can lead to someone comparing their real-life to someone’s unrealistic social media life. Overall, people must realize that the internet is not an accurate depiction of real-life and not let their emotions be too affected.

Because of the Internet’s vast abilities to connect and isolate, inform and misinform, and support and degrade, the world must use the Internet both carefully and ethically. Though the internet sells personal information and short circuits our attention span, it also allows us to connect to those across the world and to relate about being human. Though the internet is used by governments to control, it can also be used by the people to take back control and spread freedom. Though the internet can damage mental health, it can also be used as a support and to help work through struggles with other people. The internet is both a great tool and a great weapon, and if used incorrectly, it can hurt people. People need to be taught digital hygiene, both how they affect the internet and how the internet affects them and use this knowledge to discern what is important on the internet.

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