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In August 2017, the Harvard Gazette sat down with cybersecurity expert Bruce Schnier to talk about mass surveillance, both National and Corporate, as well as how people can protect themselves. The Gazette asked “It seems that U.S. customers are resigned to the idea of giving up their privacy in exchange for using Google and Facebook for free. What’s your view on this?” 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 don’t 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, the internet has grown from a crude web of research computers to a lattice that connects globally, with over half the world population connected through personal computers, cell phones, and even smart televisions ("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. "To boost self-esteem and feel a sense of belonging in their social circles, people post content with the hope of receiving positive feedback. Couple that content with the structure of potential future reward, and you get a recipe for constantly checking platforms. ("The Social Dilemma: Social Media and Your Mental Health.") ". Economically, the internet has become popular because advertisements companies pay websites to keep users online to keep seeing their advertisements. This incentivizes websites to make the internet more entertaining and addictive. Schnier says it best when he refers to internet users as the product: "Surveillance is the business model of the internet. Everyone is under constant surveillance by many companies… This data is collected, compiled, analyzed, and used to try to sell us stuff. 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 is able to reach so many people, some countries use the internet for malignant means. China, for example, has used the internet to spread misinformation and to censor people’s voices and influence. “Internet censorship is another rapidly expanding realm of government involvement. In 2000 alone, six regulations were issued to reduce the degree of freedom previously enjoyed by Internet content providers, electronic bulletin-board systems, and chatroom services. This was followed by restrictive measures designed to control bloggers, online gamers, and the transmission of audiovisual materials through Internet channels. Besides devotion of state administrative resources, Internet censorship is unique also in that it has led to the materialization of a considerable technological structure, known as the Great Firewall of China, the largest such effort in the world (”Censorship”) Because of these political motivations, some countries have intentionally made their people internet dependent for control. Because some of the reasons that the internet is so widespread are malicious, we must protect ourselves from the misuse of the great power that the internet holds. The world must use the internet both thoughtfully and ethically to avoid negative social, emotional, and political consequences.

One main way that the Internet affects its users is socially. When the Harvard Gazette asked about how U.S. internet users are forced to give up their privacy, Schneir replied “Consumers 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 don’t 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 (Schneier).” Because people need technology to be fully functional today, they feel like they are forced to give up their personal information and connect constantly to the web. The services that they know are compromising their privacy are simply too convenient to give up. Another social effect of the internet is constant connectivity caused by “Fear of Missing out.” Also known by the abbreviation FOMO, the fear of missing out is caused by a connected society. When everyone else is constantly using social media and the internet, you feel like you miss out when you take a break (“The Social Dilemma: Social Media and Your Mental Health.”) Overall, this pressures everyone into being constantly overconnected to each other, without a break, which can quickly become mentally exhausting. Another way that technology has and will continue to affect our 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 by going to local stores or to the movie theater (“The Social Dilemma: Social Media and Your Mental Health”)” Because nearly all of 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 create a better internet.

Another big way that the internet has affected the world, especially over the past few years, has been in its political effects. One massive political effect has been meddling in elections over the past few election cycles, both in North America and Europe. 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. For example, "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"). In addition to some governments using the internet to misinform and squash uprisings, the internet has also been used to censor views and limit freedom of the press to maintain control. "According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), an international nonprofit dedicated to protecting press freedoms, in 2019 the nations that most censor the internet were Eritrea, North Korea, Turkmenistan, Saudi Arabia, and China. In 2020, Freedom House, an American organization that promotes and protects democracy around the world, named China "the world's worst abuser of internet freedom." Because so many countries misuse their power to stay in control, people need to train themselves to recognize election meddling and censorship 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. Social media use can affect users’ physical health even more directly. 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 such emotional duress that it results in physical damage. Because many people use their phones at night, they end up getting less sleep than is healthy, which can cause damage. One emotional effect that relates to recent events are the emotional effects on students working remotely. Because teachers cannot help each individual student, students may begin to slip in their academics, leading to decreased motivation and a repeating cycle (Stringer). A final way that the internet effects 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?” or “Why didn’t this person like my post, but this other person did?” 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 even lead to someone comparing their real life to someone’s carefully crafted and 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, **TODO** (opposites describing emotional effects), 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. It allows us to talk with anyone about our struggles or triumphs instantly. 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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