TED: Discover the physical side of the internet

The physical side of the internet isn’t something we often consider. We often go on living thinking of the internet as being completely non-physical in fact. Never thinking of the fact that all these computers have to be connected somehow to wherever the information we’re seeing is stored and that it could well be around the world. Some of these places are buildings where one companies router connects directly to another, but some are also wires laid across the ocean floor to connect the continents. There’s a massive amount of infrastructure laid for something most of us don’t think or even know about. To connect the world is a very physical task.

I’m particularly glad this TED talk was one of our options as it’s something I’ve thought about but have never really gotten involved enough to learn about. However a lot of what he talked about is how crazy it is to go looking for the internet, yet closes on a quote by one of my favorite authors, Neal Stephenson, saying “wired people should know something about wires.” It was somewhat difficult to follow where he stood on this himself, it’s almost as if he transforms himself or adjusts his position while speaking. Where he starts by almost berating himself as if finding the internet is ridiculous and stupid and then continues to find it out and even visits a site of a connection of the internet being formed. Maybe it is a fools search to be looking for the internet as if it’s the lost city of Atlantis, but there obviously was infrastructure set up to connect it, and that there is a physical part to the internet.

I agree with what I felt was his stance by the end, that we all should know something about this tool, the internet, that we all use and has become so prevalent in our society. The internet has nearly become tied to every facet of our day to day lives. We go about our daily work often behind a computer screen, then for relief we look at our smartphone, and at the end of the day we watch programming through TV or computers for pleasure. Rarely do we think of the fact that these are all interfaces to the same thing or how it’s all connected. Even less often do we encounter problems and follow wires to find where the physical aspects are and if we do it doesn’t cross our mind that what we see there is just a miniature version of how the rest of it works.

We’re so used to technology and computers that we often don’t even think about these things, we take them for granted really. To draw this back to the quote our speaker, Andrew Blum, took from Neal Stephenson “wired people should know something about wires.” Well often times we don’t know anything about these wires, we comprehend them on a theoretical level, but we don’t think about their physicality. They’re the real components and the internet we spend so much time on and thinking about is more of a concept structured about these wires and computers.

Overall we’re well suited with the tools we have, when they’re laid out for us we can make use of them. It’s interesting to see the physical side and remember that these tools need to be connected and maintained. On another level it’s important for us to remember that we can easily sink inside of the internet which has no real depth and forget everything about the physical components. Everyone may be connected to the internet, but we need to remember that it’s still based in and connected to the rest of the world.