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The Impact of the Social Media Age on American Society and Citizens

In the past thirty or so years, American society has experienced quite possibly the most radical and fast shift in our history. The dawn of the Information Age sent shockwaves through the United States of America, changing everything from the way we drive to the way we shop. Out of all the inventions and innovations born from the age of the internet, one type of software stands above all the rest- the social media app. This communication revolution began with primitive chatrooms and forums in the 1990's; these were mostly beaten out in the early 2000's by the meteoric rise of Myspace and its eventual killer Facebook, followed by a slew of apps such as Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram. Video streaming became prevalent as sites like YouTube and Vimeo sprang up, allowing anybody with a camera to become a star overnight. These sites and services changed the very foundations of communication in America. They made publicly sharing your thoughts instant, easy, free, and sometimes anonymous, allowing for knowledge, ideas, and opinions to disseminate at blazing speed. Suddenly, everybody with internet access had a shot at grabbing their 15 seconds of fame. The rise of social media was heralded as the gateway to a brighter, more interconnected future.

Now, in 2019, it seems that future is a bit duller than imagined. Recent evidence has come to light showing that social media sites can have a harmful impact on multiple facets of American society. Corporate interests such as those of Google and Facebook have used the personal information of their users as a commodity, setting users' search information and histories to advertisers and reaping gigantic profits. Use of Social media by adolescents could

prove harmful to their social health. Instant access to information has sped up the production timelines of media companies, leading to more hastily written and less fact-checked articles and occasional misrepresentations of the truth. Americans are quickly growing more bitter and cynical, as flame wars break out more and more often. These tectonic shifts came to a head in the year 2016, when a combination of social media campaigning, irresponsible data collection, and a stream of document leaks impacted the 2016 presidential election and may have helped Donald Trump win against Hillary Clinton. Because of these rapid shifts in and stretches in the fabric of our society, I believe that we must keep a closer watch over social media companies. In order to protect our data, our freedom, and our children, we must take action to ensure these massive corporations are held accountable for the data they collect and the content they provide.

Social media is used regularly by most adolescents in America; in fact, according to a study by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), 22% of teenagers access their favorite site more than 10 times a day (O’Keeffe 2011). With the number of young users that we have, it’s important to determine exactly how much this online interaction affects the psyche of the American youth. The results of my research indicated that adolescent use has both significant benefits and downsides. Some of the benefits it provides are it provides “opportunities for community”, “enhancement of individual and collective creativity”, “growth of ideas;”, “expansion[s] of one’s online connections”, and a “fostering of one’s individual identity”, according to the AAP (O’Keeffe 2011). In other words, healthy social media use can help to enhance an adolescent’s school life and develop their sense of self. However, the vastness and unpredictability of these sites can pose quite a few problems for a teenager’s wellbeing. The primary concern of most parents is cyberbullying, a term coined to describe repeated online harassment of an individual. Cyberbullying is rather common online, and it can lead to anxiety

isolation, and depression. Overuse of social media can lead to depression and other mental health threats; once most of these issues have impacted a user, they'll likely seek out help on social media. This cycle typically perpetuates their difficulties, as these sites are typically quite a bad place to go for mental health advice. For example, in a study published by *Early Intervention in Psychiatry*, researchers found that out of eighteen search phrases entered into Facebook with the intent of getting help for schizophrenia symptoms, "[n]one... yielded Facebook pages that provided educational material, encouraged consultation or connected users to a professional mental health Facebook page." (Birnbaum 2016). Because of these risks, we need to make sure American adolescents know how to responsibly use these sites. Although the benefits are worth it, the risks of use must be considered.

Another issue facing social media companies is their ethics in collecting consumer data. Many websites harvest their users' personal data behind the scenes and sell it to companies to use. Most of these companies are advertising firms, which use this data to target users with personalized ads. Advertisers typically love to advertise online and on social media, as it gets users talking to each other about their products, making them "more likely to buy" according to the *International Journal of Market Research* (Hajili 2014). This data aggregation ecosystem has been in place for a few years, and most users haven't really noticed or cared about it. This all changed in 2018, when it was revealed that, according to *TIME* magazine, Facebook had secretly harvested the data of 87 million users and sold it to Cambridge Analytica for use in Donald Trump's election campaign (Langone 2018). Cambridge Analytica is a political analysis firm that helps to run election campaigns through the application of cutting-edge technology. A whistleblower at the firm described the company's goals as to "explore mental vulnerabilities of people, and then map out ways to inject information into different streams or channels

of content online so that people started to see things all over the place that may or may not have been true” (Langone 2018). This use of consumer data represents one of the most contentious points in the history of social media, as it shows us the enormous amount of data companies have collected off users. This commodification of users’ information has the potential to be dangerous, and as such I believe that social media companies should have to be more open about the amount and types of data they collect on their users.

Cambridge Analytica isn’t the only group that applied social media to attempt to influence the 2016 election. Since Barack Obama used the concept of a ‘social media campaign’ to win the presidency in 2008 and 2012 by communicating instantly to his base via sites such as twitter, candidates and firms nationwide have been trying new ways to incorporate social media into politics, and research has been done to determine how effective social media is as a political tool. The effectiveness of these campaigns can be shown from a study conducted by Daniela Dimitrova, Adam Shehata, and Jesper Stromback that concluded that while “there are only weak effects of digital media use on political learning, ... the use of some digital media forms has appreciable effects on political participation” (Dimitrova 2011). This means that social media is an invaluable tool during elections, as a candidate can use it to increase voter turnout. Because social media is such a useful political concept, it was used heavily during the 2016 election, with the primary user being Donald Trump. The main concern most Americans have with social media-powered elections is how susceptible they make our flow of information to outside attacks. For example, in 2016, Russia bought up incredible amounts of ad space on Facebook and spread fake news articles across millions of social media feeds to bolster the Trump campaign. This information

overload did a few things. First, it boosted Trump's publicity by astounding margins- according to a study published in the Journal of Economic Perspectives, "[articles] favoring Trump were shared a total of 30 million times on Facebook, while those favoring Clinton were shared 8 million times" (Hunt 2017). Second, it created a distrust of media among American voters, making it hard sometimes to discern which articles were real and which were fake. This fake news attack impacted a significant margin of the American populace- according to a Stanford study that examined the impact of fake news on the election, "14 percent [of Americans] say they relied on Facebook and other social media sites as their most important source of news" (Crawford 2017). This attack, as well as the hacks on the DNC and the spread of stolen documents on WikiLeaks, lead to Clinton "blow[ing] a 7-percentage-point lead over [Trump] in the final month of the campaign," according to an article by Harry Enten (Enten 2016). The 2016 presidential election proved that social media could be used as a weapon against our democracy. As a result of this, I believe we must work to hold social media sites more accountable for the advertisers they take on and the validity of news articles they host.

Social media has changed the way Americans communicate forever, making the dissemination of ideas wireless, easy, and instant. However, the corporations controlling this power are not always responsible with it. Because of the dangers these sites pose in the family, corporate, and political setting, I believe companies must be held to a higher standard for the services they provide. Companies such as Facebook should more publicly disclose the information they commodify and sell, and we need to be more responsible when it comes to using social media and educating our youth on its applications. This method of instant communication is a powerful and incredible thing, but only if it is applied responsibly.

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