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ENGL 111

20 June 2023

The Influence of Social Media on Society: A Comparative of Two Texts

Social media was supposed to be a fun and easy way for people to share what is going on in their current lives. However, this has not been the case in practice. What people see on social media today is full of filters, highlight reels, and illusions. As a result, social media has caused a downturn in mental health among the general population, predominantly impacting young people. The articles How Smartphones Hijack Our Minds by Nicholas Carr and Social Media: The Screen, the Brain, and Human Nature by Justin Vinh delve deeply into the implications of social media on mental health. After analyzing both texts, I believe that Vinh presents a more compelling argument given within an academic context as evidenced by the quality of his research, professional writing style, and the genre of publication in comparison to Nicholas Carr.

In assessing the research of authors Vinh and Carr, both have demonstrated extensive research in the topic of smartphone usage, presenting detailed and nuanced arguments. The breadth of both of their research is appropriate for the pieces that they have written. However, differences appear when examining the quality and diversity of their research sources. Vinh takes advantage of a wide array of studies in constructing his argument, improving the scope and authority of his work. Instead of focusing on a single source or study type, he references various scholarly works, with a significant emphasis on academic journals. This approach secures his work's position in an academic context, with each citation contributing to the robustness of his argument. The credibility of these sources enhances the persuasiveness of Vinh's article and shows his commitment to presenting an in depth and reliable review. On the other hand, Carr's research, while extensive, relies more on popular science and predominantly cites college studies. Despite the value of these sources, they often lack the authority associated with published journal articles, which benefit from a rigorous peer-review process and strict academic standards. As a result, Carr's argument, while well-researched, doesn't hold as much academic weight as Vinh's due to the type of sources used. Although both authors have conducted appropriate and thorough research for their respective works, Vinh's use of a diverse selection of scholarly sources is more convincing in an academic context than Carr's more popular science based approach. Vinh's reliance on published journal articles gives him a greater degree of credibility, making his argument more robust and persuasive.

The tone used in each of the articles are distinct with one being relatively formal and one relatively informal. Carr's tone, characteristic of an opinion piece, is suggestive of an individual attacking an opponent. For example, when referring to the act of using a smartphone, he describes it as ““consulting the glossy little rectangle nearly 30,000 times in the coming year”” (Carr 589). Although Carr incorporates extensive research and empirical data, his interpretation of the data tends to be overstated. Carr's commentary on a study at UCSD assessing individuals' problem solving abilities with and without a cell phone at hand is quite revealing. The study concluded that individuals with a cell phone were significantly outperformed by those without one. However, Carr dramatically labels those with cell phones as “oblivious even as the phones disrupted their focus.” Despite the entertainment value offered by Carr's writing style, it is overly dramatic and detracts from the research's findings. On the other hand, Vinh takes a significantly more academic and neutral approach. For example, he discusses the outcomes of a survey conducted by the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, which studied teenagers and their emotional response to social media. He states, “The results make sense. On social media, people cannot really interact because the forms of communication used are shallow” (Vinh 610). In comparison to Carr, Justin Vinh appears more controlled and rational. This difference substantially enhances a written piece's persuasiveness. Although Carr is both entertaining and persuasive for a general audience, his approach loses efficacy in an academic context. In fact, Carr even takes a jab at big tech companies like Apple, Google, and Facebook, claiming they “design their products to consume as much of our attention as possible during every one of our waking hours”. This statement is effective for a general audience as it makes them question their daily interactions with these products and companies. However, this would not work in an academic context. Vinh maintains a pragmatic and composed stance, effectively conveying his findings to an academic audience. Given this, I find Vinh's approach more persuasive than his use of academic research.

Finally, one particularly interesting part of the readings is the preface providing context about the author and the work. Despite Carr's impressive credentials and publications, his work, in an academic sense, is less persuasive than Vinh's. The introduction indicates that “this essay was published in the Wall Street Journal in 2017”(Carr 597). The Wall Street Journal is a profit driven news outlet that also has a bias. It is possible that a print publication would favor articles discussing technology's impact on the human brain, since it aligns with their interest to sway people away from modern technology and towards traditional print media. On the other hand, Justin Vinh's essay is meant for strictly academic and research purposes. While this doesn't significantly impact persuasiveness, it's noteworthy that this fact is mentioned upfront. This further substantiates the argument that Vinh approaches mental health as an academic issue rather than as a topic designed to entertain or engage a larger audience. Regarding structure, Carr presents his points hastily, quickly moving from one subtopic to another while bringing up more facts and evidence. Although this style makes his article more engaging, it is less persuasive in the context of this essay. Vinh, on the other hand, takes more time to thoroughly dissect the results from the various academic sources he cites. After doing so, he analyzes and applies the results to his argument. His writing smoothly transitions from point to point, focusing on depth and context. While Carr seems to emphasize brevity, relying on his heated writing style to make his points, Vinh underscores the importance of depth in his exploration. The style of Carr's work is reminiscent of an editorial, trying to persuade the average reader of the potential intellectual hazards of smartphones and modern technology. He even compares major tech corporations with traditional mail and print media. He illustrates this by suggesting, "imagine combining a mailbox, a newspaper, a TV, a radio, a photo album, a public library…and compressing them into a single, small, radiant object" (Carr 602), then challenging readers to reflect on why they might perceive smartphones as non-disruptive. The concluding parts of Carr's work sound preachy and non-academic. On the other hand, Vinh does not aim to sway the reader to his side in his final comments. Instead, he brings together the evidence he has presented and wraps up with the statement, “Studies show a strong relationship exists between [loneliness, unhappiness, stress and, anxiety] and social media.”(Vinh 612). This conclusion stands in stark contrast to Carr's opinionated piece, aligning more closely with an academic context.

In conclusion, although both articles have certain shared aspects and are convincing in their assertion of technology and social media’s impact on society, Vinh's article, in my opinion, is more persuasive in an academic context, based on his tone, research, and structure. Vinh crafts an argument that not only resonates with the targeted audience but also makes his referenced research accessible and effectively applies it to his overall argument. Carr adopts an aggressive stance, urging people to face the reality he describes, which is particularly evident in how he uses the evidence he cites. Vinh's apparent restraint on such a complex topic is refreshing and makes people more receptive to an issue that can feel like and uncomfortable subject. Carr's writing style, while engaging, quite ironically embodies the very thing he critiques in his article. It is deliberately exaggerated and sensationalized to keep readers hooked, similar to the strategies employed by social media. Vinh, however, does not try to get readers to turn pages or buy newspapers but is analyzing data to address societal issues. It is these reasons that, in my opinion, Vinh's writing possesses greater persuasiveness and authenticity regarding the issue of technology and social media.

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