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Day by day, an astounding half a billion individuals log onto Instagram, while nearly 1.5 billion people access TikTok. Given these colossal numbers for only two platforms, it's mind-boggling to envision the volume of users connecting to the myriad of other internet services. It's an irrefutable fact that the internet has revolutionized society, permeating every aspect of our lives. In this era, we all carry a pocket-sized portal to an endless universe of knowledge and information, providing access to all forms of media at our fingertips. This reality, which could be perceived as utopian, begs an important question: Is this constant influx of information and media making us more intelligent and sociable? And how can we construct a more prosperous society utilizing these potent tools that we carry around every day? While I contend that the internet is profoundly important for humanity, the unrestricted character of the internet has shown to have adverse effects on mental health, cognitive performance, and society as a whole. However, I will also recognize the positive impact the internet has had on education, creating opportunities that would not exist otherwise.

To start, how has the internet affected the mental health of society collectively? In her article "Stop Googling, Let's Talk," published originally in the New York Times, Sherry Turkle discusses the argument against technology and its influence on social interactions. The article takes a firm position on how smartphones, in particular, are contributing to problems with young people's social interactions. In her article, she points out that "technology is implicated in this assault on empathy." She substantiates this with an account of a private middle school that invited Turkle to examine the school's social environment. What she observed was a stark absence of conversation among the students, with most of them engrossed in their phones. In the article, Turkle states, "the old conversation taught empathy. These students seem to understand each other less." This single quote reveals the social implications of constant internet access. Middle school is a critical period in the social development of young children. They learn to form friendships, cooperate, and create connections. However, the article addresses the barrier that digital devices have erected. Students are essentially secluding themselves from one another in favor of continuous internet access. The intriguing part is the other side of the story. Turkle refers to a study done on children who attended a device-free camp that lasted for five days. The study found that these children were "able to read facial emotions and identify the emotions of actors more accurately than before." Based on this aspect alone, it’s clear that unrestricted access to the internet has stunted the social growth of children.

Another interesting component of the internet is its effect on romantic relationships. In a study conducted by PEW Research, authors Amanda Lenhart, Monica Anderson, and Aaron Smith surveyed and focus-grouped teenagers about social media usage and their feelings towards their significant others. The results are far from ideal when considering the purported objectives of these apps. Mark Zuckerberg famously stated that the purpose of Facebook was to foster connections and communication. If this were the case, one would anticipate the participants to feel a stronger bond with their partners. However, the results were shocking. 27% of subjects stated that social media made them "jealous or unsure of their relationship." Furthermore, "36% [of teen girls] agree that their significant other is less authentic and real on social media than they are offline, with 7% agreeing strongly." The same sentiment was reflected in teen boys, with one saying "It don't mean nothing no more" when asked about "how meaningful and authentic these social media displays of affection really were." Not only is social media and technology isolating middle school children from making friends, but it is also stripping the authenticity and damaging teens' desire and commitment for more intimate relationships. Relationships that are formative for the future for these teens. There's little doubt that social media has had a detrimental impact on the mental health development of the youth. As Scott Galloway, a professor at NYU Stern, succinctly expressed when asked about his views on youth on social media, “I’d rather give my son Jack Daniels and Marijuana than an Instagram account.” The opposite side of the mental health coin is concerned with mental performance. Considerable research has been conducted on the impact that the internet and technology have on our brain's functionality. Many specialists, including Dr. Rawan Tarawneh from The Ohio State University, assert that the internet "may make us more easily distractible because it reduces our ability to ignore distractions" (Tarawneh). In his journal article, Dr. Tarawneh metaphorically likens the internet and the issues it causes to a treatable disease. The neurologist attributes this decline in focus to a specific aspect of the internet: digital multitasking. He maintains that the nature of the internet "trains our brains to quickly shift focus to the stream of pop-ups, prompts, and notifications—this may, in fact, interfere with our ability to maintain focus on a particular cognitive task for extended times" (Tarawneh). The commercial internet primarily aims to capture attention. Consequently, many websites are designed to saturate viewers with as much stimuli as possible, to keep them on the platforms. Dr. Tarawneh suggests that this forceful shortform attention multitasking depletes our minds and ultimately diminishes our ability to concentrate on tasks.

Another critical impact that the internet has made on society pertains to the dissemination of information. People have instant access to global information and news with just a few taps on a phone. This unbounded innovation, while it may appear utopian, allowing for unfettered truth-telling, also creates new problems. The unregulated nature of the internet allows anyone to pose as experts and publish information available for anyone to consume. Fake news has become a real issue and is merely a product of an unrestricted internet. According to PEW surveys, nearly everyone has encountered fake news. The study begins with a disconcerting statistic: 23% of participants admit they have shared a made-up news story, knowingly or unknowingly. This bears real-world consequences, as illustrated by the manufactured "pizzagate" conspiracy that led a North Carolina man to bring a gun into a popular Washington, D.C. pizza restaurant under the mistaken belief that it was sheltering a child prostitution ring. While this example is extreme, the study demonstrates the American population's struggle to discern between real and fake news. Barthel and his co-authors found that "64% of Americans expressed a great deal of confusion" about current events due to concocted news stories. According to various political commentators, the U.S Capitol raid was largely a result of false information, widely spread on social media and the internet. Stories about voter fraud and tampering, propagated by known purveyors of false information, played a significant role. This issue isn't new. As Nsikan Akpan, a journalist from PBS, pointed out, fake information has been rampant on the internet, causing panic since 2010. "Irrational fears of the Ebola virus in the U.S. arguably drove web interest in this fake news story, as it likely did for any number of legitimate articles written during the outbreak" (Akpan).

Despite the challenges posed by the internet, it has proven to be extremely beneficial for education. This became especially apparent during the pandemic, facilitating learning in secure environments. Consultants at McKinsey & Company, arguably the most prestigious firm globally, provided an intriguing perspective on industry knowledge and the impact of technology on education. Their market research produced several significant findings. The most noteworthy one is that technology in the hands of teachers is associated with higher scores than technology in the hands of students. Their analysis of the PISA High School exam results demonstrated that "internet-connected computers in the classroom is correlated with nearly a grade-level-better performance on the PISA assessment (assuming approximately 40 PISA points to every grade level)" (Bryant). This data trend transcends geography, with PISA gains found in Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and North America. Although the regions affected the total increase in PISA score, the net data shows a constant upward trend. The consultants concluded that "technology must be used correctly to be effective" (Bryant). Dr. Saro Mohammed conducted further research on the impact of the internet and technology on education for the Brookings Institute. She discovered that "A 2018 meta-analysis of dozens of rigorous studies of ed tech, along with the executive summary of a forthcoming update (126 rigorous experiments), indicated that when education technology is used to individualize students' pace of learning, the results overall show 'enormous promise'" (Mohammed). This aligns with the findings from the McKinsey report, but the business consultants did not delve into the internet's potential to bridge socio-economic disparities and combat inequality. Upon reviewing data from PEW and raw PISA Metadata, Mohammed concluded, "Technology for learning, when deployed to all students, ensures that no student experiences a '21st-century skills and opportunity' gap." There's no denying the considerable disparity in education quality across the U.S and around the globe. The internet has offered a means to teach crucial skills for the twenty-first century to the wider populace, bypassing the need for resource-heavy schools and programs. Mohammed reinforced this in her closing remarks, asserting, "thoughtful inclusion of technology in public learning environments can ensure that all students, regardless of their ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language status, special education status, or other characteristics, have the opportunity to experience learning and develop skills that allow them to fully realize their potential." (Mohammed).

In summary, there's no question that technology, particularly the internet, is the most significant invention and infrastructure to date. The advancements it has made possible are beyond accurate measurement. However, it's impossible to overlook the harmful aspects of the internet, which include its impact on the mental health and social development of young people, as well as its potential to diminish overall brain function and productivity. It's a double-edged sword, as the internet offers an extraordinarily unique opportunity in education, making it more accessible and of higher quality for those who might otherwise lack access. The core problem with the internet lies in its inception—it emerged without any regulatory constraints. It's only recently that governing bodies have begun to take strong measures against data protection and misinformation. The internet is a powerful tool for good, but a more cautious approach is necessary if we aim to utilize it for the betterment and progression of society as a whole.

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