Owen Lafferty

Professor Perry

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The Ability to Experience, Learn, and Understand: The Real Value of the Internet

“Every person always seeks their own good, in every situation, as perceived in the moment.”

— Socrates, “The Apology of Socrates”

Little in life is universally true. Even ideas that have never been proven false are still called “theorems” because they, similarly, have yet to be proven true. “The internet is bad,” inherently, applies to this notion as well. Moreso, even, because it is clearly a blanket statement that is not discussing anything remotely specific. However, looking around in society today, you would be hard pressed to find any evidence that it isn’t true. Adamantly, people rue the day they first held a device with access to the world, while simultaneously being completely unable to exist without it. Most just dismiss this as the device being “addictive,” putting it in the same category as what ranges from cigarettes to heroin, despite this device not physically harming you at all. I would agree, it is “addictive,” but when we use this word… What do we mean by it? Does everything addictive have to be bad?

As previously stated, we hate the internet. So much so, and so widely so, that you would be crazy to suggest otherwise. Everyone already knows what the internet is and it is bad. Its a place where attention span and mental health go to die. A place where people can say whatever they want and not receive consequences. Just look at Gen Z, they were given the internet to grow up with and look how they turned out. This is a problem highlighted by Kirk S. Kidwell, the assistant director of the Center for Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University in “Understanding the College First-year Experience.” In this article, he writes to high school English teachers and freshman writing professors for colleges. He wants these professors to understand that their methods of teaching are not helping students develop into complex thinkers. He lays out how he thinks there is a development in thinking, and freshman students start at the beginning, and need to be led to the later levels. Halfway into the article, he explains what he means explicitly when he says, “In brief, the transformation in learning styles occurs in four phases, often characterized as dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment in relativism. The vast majority of first-year students enter college as dualists” (254). This idea perfectly describes what is happening in society today. However, where I differ from Kidwell, is that I don’t think that everybody gets out of the dualist mindset. In fact, despite there being 4 levels of thinking, I don’t believe that many people on the planet have even so much as made it past the first stage. The entire world has listened to the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, and Gen X when they said the internet was bad. It was foreign to them and people do not like foreign. We listen because we are dualists. It's easier. Kidwell even says so when he describes it as “the naïve comfort of dualist thinking,” (255). I used to be like this as well. Admittedly it is easy to hate the internet. It looks dystopian. It's intrinsically inhumane. A year ago, my stance on the topic was completely different than it is now. I used to believe everything I was told. I was ashamed for using the internet as much as I did, I was practically raised on it. This feeling is also shared amongst many of my peers, and probably you, too. I wished that I never got into it. A life-changing event, a lot of self introspection, and a really interesting socratic seminar later, I was compelled to ask myself “Why do I hate the internet; Am I justified?” Immediately I knew how I felt on the inside. I loved the internet. It made me into the person I am today. But something within me echoed the “truth” that has been so dualistically pelted into my brain by those who held power and authority over me. “The internet ruins social interaction, attention span, and mental health, and is corrupting the youth.”

In order to assess what the internet does to people, I think it is necessary to define which generations were developed by the internet and which ones were not. I already alluded to how Gen Z is the prime example of a generation made by the internet, but how true is that? According to Kim Parker, Director of Social Trends Research at Pew Research Center, in a study titled “On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know about Gen Z so Far,” she gives some insight to how prominent the internet is amongst Gen Z. This study mainly covers how Gen Z differs from other generations on issues like inclusion, racism, government, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, etc. However, before talking about any of that, Parker says, “[Gen Z] are also digital natives who have little or no memory of the world as it existed before smartphones.” And in the study, she presents a graph that shows that a staggering 3% of the generation are not active users of social media. Let alone the entire internet. I think her statement perfectly encapsulates how I feel about technology. While I might’ve not been given a smartphone at a very young age, I do not remember a world where my parents haven’t had one. This is a fundamental dissonance between other generations. Millennials were growing up during the beginning of the internet, when it lacked identity, but they still had access to it. Gen X and above, however, did not grow up with the internet that we know today. The best way to assess what the internet does to change people, the best course of action, to me, would be to compare Gen Z or Millennials to these other generations. Mainly Gen Z, because we’ve grown up after the developmental years of the internet, with MySpace and the like.

Corrupting the youth. One half of the conviction for Socrates’ execution. A very serious crime, with that precedent. The internet, if it does corrupt the youth, should be unforgivable. Youth is the future of our planet. So how does the internet do this? In order to find out, I interviewed my mom, Jill Lafferty, a pediatric developmental specialist who specializes in the development of children with disabilities. I asked her in what ways she thinks the internet is harmful to children. Her response was, “I think the harmful parts are those that change ideas and pictures quickly… Tik Tok is really bad. Even to people like us… developing an attention span of that 15 second length is extremely harmful to us, let alone a child who has yet to develop an attention span at all… And the popularity of short form content has expanded beyond just Tiktok or shorts or whatever. Even cartoons are shorter now. Before, cartoons used to run for 20-30 minutes, but now, the most popular cartoon amongst kids, Bluey, is about 7 minutes in run time… And if we look at neurodivergent children, you as an example, I think you–if you were watching 10 second videos–would be a disaster.” Wow. Thanks Mom. Love you too. But she’s 100% right, and I have horrible ADHD. A standard dose of adderall is enough for an average person to get a day’s worth of work done in a few hours at most. And it is barely, if even, enough to neutralize me for a few hours. It sucks. If I were to be raised on Tiktok and short form content, I know for a fact that I wouldn’t be any better than I am now. And I would probably be much worse than I am now. These are the dangers of the internet when it comes to how usage of it can affect the average person. The short form content craze is a genuine scare to the development of not only children, but the entirety of society. It should only be a matter of time before we are all zombies, completely incapable of learning anything that takes longer than 10 seconds to comprehend. And not only that, but in order to further assess how usage of social media affects mental health, I interviewed my sister, Mady. Mady Lafferty is a high school student who has achieved over 500,000 followers on Tiktok. She currently has 250,000 followers at the time of this writing. In interviewing her, I wanted to know how popularity has affected her mental health, through the ups and downs. All I asked was how, if at all, would she change how she used her phone if she could go back in time to the first time she had one. Mady said “Well I got my first iPhone when I was in 3rd grade… So pretty young. I wish I would’ve waited longer to have gotten one. Regardless–I would change how I post on social media in general. I wish I didn’t get so caught up in what other people are thinking or saying about what I post. And in general I would post whatever I want about whatever I want; Not let anyone else influence me; you know? I also would’ve changed the way I talk to my friends–like when I just got a phone I went straight to snap[chat], I wish I would’ve gone to messages or calls more.” Overall, I would not hesitate to say that using apps like Instagram or Snapchat are bad for your mental health. You are comparing yourself to the people around you constantly, but only looking at the pictures that they think portrays themselves in the best light. You're comparing your perpetual self to the perfect moments of those around you. Most feel inadequate due to this. The obviously false statement that everyone around me is perfect and I’m not is one that has become rampant nowadays, especially amongst people in our generation. These ideas have led to increased mental health issues than in previous generations. The obsession with arbitrary numbers like followers, likes, favorites, etc. From this information, one would assume that the internet is something that should be kept away from children. The attention span and mental health of children are being shattered and aren’t being properly reassembled. A jury in Athens in the year 399 B.C. would deem this sufficient evidence to be corrupting the youth.

But there is a problem, “the internet” is too broad. The internet, in relation to the development of humans, to me—can be separated into two categories. Constructive Media and Destructive Media. There are parts of the internet and technology that can be helpful towards the growth of individuals, and there are parts that can be harmful. I have already discussed the parts I would label as Destructive Media, but what about the internet is Constructive? I asked Jill Lafferty what apps that she thought were helpful to developing children, or people in general. In response to this question, she said, “Here’s the thing–children need repetition. If you introduce something like a dog or cat, which makes which noise, you gotta repeat dog goes woof, cat goes meow. Grown ups nowadays hate this because they call it stupid and repetitive. That it's rotting their brain. However, a lot of apps like youtube, or various apps specifically made for infants, are often better at teaching their children than [the parents] are… Youtube is good, most videos there are 10 minutes ish, sometimes even longer, that's enough to learn; generally not harmful to the attention span–in a perfect world, I’d want videos to be a little longer, but it’s fine… Youtube also often allows kids to have much bigger imaginations, because I see kids that we give youtube to take ideas from these videos and expand on them… and it really helps children develop into their own person.” A similar sentiment is shown from a small study conducted by Werben und Verkaufen Online, titled “Z through.” W&V is a trusted authority in Germany’s advertising sector, known for its in-depth reporting and influence on industry trends. This article highlights how the internet has allowed for change in the new generation, Gen Z, using 4 individual examples on how. However, this article is only available in German, so I used a translator for it. On that note, I won’t take what the article says and dissect the words. I will only highlight the main topics and ideas presented. In the article, they say “Even as children, [Gen Z] began to engage intensively with topics, often through a "rabbit hole" on platforms like YouTube and, today, TikTok. There, it's commonplace to not only become a fan of something, but also to develop genuine expertise. Whether it's the 12-year-old who becomes a video editing pro through YouTube tutorials, the 19-year-old who launches their own startup thanks to social media, or the KPOP fans who learn a language completely alien to our educational system and know its artists inside and out—[Gen Z] are passionate about topics and become experts in them.” An app like youtube allows for the development of people into a specialist of their own. The amount that you can learn about a topic you are interested in is feasibly infinite, and Gen Z is reaping the benefits. People are becoming more individualistic than ever before thanks to social media like youtube. From this we could say that Youtube is a piece of constructive media. In general, despite some forms of social media being destructive, I think that social media as a whole has allowed a generation of individuals to develop fully. Completely prejudiced opinion from me, but I feel like Gen X and above have very little unique experiences. They all get the same jokes, did the same things growing up, listened to the same music, watched the same shows, think the same things, and have the same references. That is because the internet has allowed for people to have access to whatever they want and participate in things that are specific to them. Gen X and above didn’t have that choice when they were growing up. In the 80s, if you liked pop music, you pretty much had to listen to Michael Jackson. Even if you didn’t like pop music you probably got an earful of the King of Pop. Nowadays, it would be more concerning if you somehow found someone with exactly the same music taste as you. I can tell you that I’ve yet to meet someone who has the same taste as me. Funny enough, I remember a quote from my mom, completely separate from our interview, a year ago, where she said “I just don’t know how you find all these different artists. Like I’ve never heard of any of these people.” And to me, I thought everybody just found one or two artists that they enjoy–naturally–and let the music apps’ algorithms lead you to wherever it was needed. That is what I did, that is what my friends did, after that my mom told me about how you had to listen to whatever was on the radio; If your favorite song wasn’t on there, you’d better hope you had a tape of it. I find this difference very important to note when talking about the difference between the individuality between generations. Fundamentally, the inability to experience a variety of things makes your palette bland; you can’t know you like something that you don’t know exists.

The collective wisdom of the entirety of humanity is in your pocket. People know this. You probably know this, subconsciously. And 15 years ago we randomly decided to put this power into the hands of children. How did that turn out? Also 15 years ago, John K. Waters realized this and decided to write about it in his article “The Kids Are All Right.” Waters is a researcher who has written extensively on topics like online learning, STEM education, and the discussion of banning technology use in schools. In this article, Waters uses a study that was conducted regarding the use of technology to develop the brains of children intellectually. The article notes how people are often scared of the internet, because they see it as a distraction. However, they say that people should actually probably lessen the restrictions on internet use because it is driving children towards what they want to learn. In this article, he relays information from the study saying that, “In fact, the researchers found that the internet is empowering a tech-savvy generation to pursue a central element of 21st century education–self-directed learning, performed on kids' own terms and time schedules.” This “self-driven learning is a key characteristic of our generation. The ability to learn whatever it is that we want to learn. What is so moving about this article from Waters is when you compare it to the studies of today. Going back to Kim Parker on “What We Know about Gen Z so Far,” she shares information she found in the section titled “Gen Z on track to be the best-educated generation yet” when she says, “A look at older members of Generation Z suggests they are on a somewhat different educational trajectory than the generations that came before them. They are less likely to drop out of high school and more likely to be enrolled in college.” Additionally, Jill Lafferty also gave me her thoughts on how the internet has affected the intelligence of our generation, “I think the internet has made people, at least in your generation, to be very intelligent. You guys are used to having so much more information at your disposal, so you’ve developed the ability to digest it quicker, which in my experience has made you guys a lot quicker learners.” When you look at these pieces of information and when they were released, It goes to show how John Waters and the other researchers in this study were correct. They saw the value of the internet in the scope of its “self-driven learning,” which also plays into how individualistic this generation is. While I’m not going to make the bold claim that Gen Z is smarter on average than other generations like my mom did, I will say that our generation has spent our entire lives learning. It is so easy nowadays to learn about whatever it is that interests you. All of my peers seem to be walking encyclopedias for their own topic, rarely sharing the same topics of interest. In a way, I feel like this directly contrasts with what the public perception of the internet in regards to education today. People often believe that the internet is making people dumber, more reliant on the ability to look up information instead of memorize it. But these quotes show that this is not the case. A wise man once said that the unexamined life is not worth living. The inability to learn makes life boring, uninteresting, not worth living.

In the grand scope of society, some might argue that none of this matters. What good is intelligence if you can’t contribute to society? How does the internet raise a society? According to Jing Zeng in the article “#OkBoomer, time to meet the Zoomers: studying the memefication of intergenerational politics on TikTok,” Gen Z is a cohesive unit. In this article, Zeng writes to other scholars of internet society about the true place of memes in specifically Gen Z’s culture. She wants the audience to understand how Gen Z uses memes like “ok boomer” to make a collective comradery and to make fun of certain inequalities that Gen Z have noticed between the two generations. This comradery is shown when Zeng says “We take a sociological approach to understanding ‘generations’ as a symbolic and dynamic, rather than a biological and static, existence. As a form of social identity, a ‘generation’ comes into being through collective identification, or through creating the ‘generational we-sense’. Gen Z TikTokers’ engagements with generational politics can be understood as their articulation of such a we-sense.” This “we-sense” that Zeng speaks of is very much present in our generation. Personally, I feel as though I am able to relate to people in Gen Z simply because I am in Gen Z too. Before I elaborate on that, I deem it prudent to introduce another idea from W&V in their article “Z Through,” when they describe key characteristics of our generation, “The rejection of a hyper-rational world, the search for joy, happiness, and escapism [76% of gen z].” Gen Z is the most spiritual generation. No more is “success” valued on a rational, empirical scale of how much money you have or how much you can brag about. Gen Z cares about happiness. What we care about is that I’m happy, you are happy–whatever that means to you. Personally, I don’t judge people off of how much money they have or how much power they hold. Success, to me, is personal. What is successful to you is not successful to me. Gen Z is not in search of the same success as older generations; When previous generations needed to step on their peers to get higher, our generation is able to simply respect each other because we all know that we are working towards our own happiness. And we understand that happiness is different for each individual person. And that not only makes us more individual, but also more accepting of other people. “Roughly half of Gen Zers (50%) and Millennials (47%) think that society is not accepting enough of [Nonbinary individuals]. Smaller shares of Gen Xers (39%), Boomers (36%) and those in the Silent Generation (32%) say the same.” (What We Know About Gen Z). Additionally in this article, they mention that only 15% of Gen Z thinks that same sex marriage is a bad thing for society, which is half the amount from Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation. These changes are universal too. Gen Z is ushering in a new era of republicanism. “In their views on race, Gen Z Republicans are more likely than older generations of Republicans to say blacks are treated less fairly than whites in the U.S. today… And the youngest Republicans are less likely than their older counterparts to attribute the earth’s warming temperatures to natural patterns, as opposed to human activity… Republican Gen Zers (41%) think forms should include additional gender options, compared with 27% of Republican Millennials, 17% of Gen Xers and Boomers and 16% of Silents.” (What We Know About Gen Z). From this we can see that the internet has changed fundamentally the entire morality of a generation. In my opinion, for the better. Because what world is better than a one where the most people are happy? Anecdotally, I come from a very Republican neighborhood. 97% white graduation class, 138 students. I can count on one hand the amount of people in my grade that were left-leaning. However, in my life… I’ve only met one person my age that was racist. And they didn’t even go to my school. My entire life, regardless of whether or not I agreed with them politically, I felt the Republicans were the most misunderstood group of people. My friends cared about the groups that were discriminated against. They actively tried to help when they could. They never bullied or tortured any of the LGBTQ+ individuals that went to our school. However, I only just recently found out that my perception of the party was largely based on the experience I had with Gen Z republicans. Despite the hard truth, I think this spells nothing but positive for the future of our society with the internet helping us raise a generation. Gen Alpha might follow this precedent and soon, we might have a world where inclusion is not a debate. This is the most important part of the internet for me. The inability to hear the opinions of others makes you close-minded. And the internet gives you the ability to hear. The ability to open your mind and understand those around you is powerful.

The neglect of these things have led to a seemingly prejudiced version of the internet that has corrupted the minds of the masses. We, as Gen Z, have been convinced that the internet is bad. Some have been convinced that it has corrupted the youth. The majority has said that. Most of my peers say that they will not give the internet to their children for that reason. But just like when Socrates was executed for such a charge, for changing the way that people thought, and ushering in a new way of looking at the world, I believe this conviction to be unjust. I was raised by the internet. Through and through. I was glued to technology and consumed massive amounts of content. I think the internet, when viewing the right content, is essential to the development of individuals into better members of society. I wanted to cap off my interview with my Mom with a more general question, one I think can give us a completely new insight into the internet as a whole. One without the black and white, good and bad, right and wrong lens that I used for some of my other questions. Something simple, like “How do you think the internet has changed my life?” Mrs. Lafferty said “I think you would’ve gotten into a lot more trouble, I think you would’ve been scolded more frequently. I think you would’ve been restricted where we could take you. I could not imagine being forced to take you to a show. You were too loud. The internet provided you with that ability to calm you down that we never did. Luckily you never had tantrums when we took away stuff. I think it helped your behavior, it definitely helped your ADHD. I think the internet allowed you to experience the world in a way that was much more enjoyable to you. You were able to watch content that was interesting to you for hours, I think youtube actually helped your attention span–With all of those videos that you used to watch for days.” I never thought about it like that until my Mom said it. The internet allowed me to experience the world in a way that was much more enjoyable to me. If I ever didn’t want to do something–which was often–The internet gave me a way to do something else I enjoyed more. It showed me a diverse community of people that I never would’ve met otherwise. A diverse congregation of ideas, teaching me to think differently than I could’ve ever done it without it. I do not regret a thing. If I could do it all over again. The only thing I would change is how ashamed I used to be about my usage of the internet. And when I’m in the situation where I would need to decide whether or not to give it to my children, I’ll allow it. But I’d keep them off of the potentially harmful apps like Instagram and Tiktok, and instead allow them to experience a world more enjoyable to them. Whatever that looks like to them; Because the internet can give that to them.

The inability to experience, learn, and understand. So no, don’t give your children access to the internet. I’m not going to force you to do anything; I was taught better than that. The world can return to the way it was before. Full of hate, conformity, prejudice, and naivety. But if we dare to embrace the internet not as a villain, but as a mirror reflecting humanity’s best and worst, we might see its true value–a tool that amplifies our capacity to grow. Because what is wrong with the internet is also what is wrong with ourselves. We don’t like the internet because it shows us everything that is wrong with ourselves. It holds a mirror to our collective strengths and frailties. To dismiss it as inherently harmful is to ignore its unparalleled power to amplify knowledge, create empathy, and cultivate individuality. Yet, when looking at all of these in parallel, we find the internet’s highest purpose: to challenge dualistic thinking, and empower each generation to find “The Good” on their own terms.

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