

# THE INTERNET AND YOU: BENEFITS AND CAUSIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*Technological literacy has economic, political, moral, ethical, ecological, and indeed even psychic or spiritual aspects. Technologies like the Internet can be used for enlightenment or manipulation, for social cohesion or social fragmentation. Thus, the Internet becomes a significant practical problem requiring reflective thought and emancipatory action. Most people at some stage will use the Internet. The overall purpose of this article is to critically explore the Internet as a practical tool in relation to individuals and their empowerment. After a brief definition of the Internet, the article first examines how it can positively shape individual life. Second, it critically examines problems both directly related to the Internet as a tool and the more subtle consequences that arise as the Internet becomes a new structure and metaphor guiding thought and action. The last section suggests a balanced use of the Internet between its benefits and cautions.*

## Introduction

Here we sit in the Information Age, besieged by more information than any mind can handle, trying to make sense of the complexity that continues to grow around us. Simply put, the Internet is a massive network of computers from around the world all connected by cable and satellite. When users are connected to the Internet, they can receive text, images, video and sound on their computer from computers anywhere in the world. Just as there is a book or magazine on nearly every subject in local libraries, bookshops or newsagents, so is there information on virtually every subject on the Internet. The Internet is sometimes called the **World Wide Web (www)** or just '**the Net**'.

The Internet is a revolutionary phenomenon that enables millions of individuals across the globe to access, exchange, analyze, and create

vast amounts of information. As a major factor in the information highway, the Internet is a vast network system that processes data and information between innumerable sites in the virtual electronic world called cyberspace. Because the Internet "personality" has been characterized as everything from free and egalitarian to wild and anarchic, it is no wonder that it has generated tremendous excitement, promise, and fear in the popular imagination.

New information technologies provide tools and ways of thinking that shape every aspect of our lives. The Internet, taken as a tool, it assists one in specific tasks associated with study, communication, or leisure. But taken as a whole technology, a unified world of systematic processes, they come to dictate one's perception of reality and to dominate every sphere of life. The Internet is one of the major technological systems currently changing how we define knowledge, personal value, and social relationships.

The Internet was launched in 1969 by the Department of Defense<sup>1</sup> to ensure that information essential for national security could continue to be distributed if any part of the system failed. In the 1990s the Internet evolved into the largest public electronic "superhighway" connecting over 20 million computers all over the world. The power of the Internet can be likened to the quickness and complexity of a global sized brain.

Because the Internet enables people to communicate with each other through a variety of electronic mail and discussion group options, it has also been likened to a global village or virtual community.

The most popular "highway" on the Internet is the World Wide Web, which combines the interactivity of video games, the information of text, and the aesthetic appeal of graphics and video. Individuals and organizations can relatively easily and inexpensively create their own sites for the Web with one or more pages of visual and textual information—an appealing option that currently prompts an addition of 5,000 new Web pages each day since 1997 and this has been on the increase.<sup>2</sup> All in all, the Internet is truly a remarkable world filled with information and open to imaginative possibilities for education, entertainment, and communication.

## **Benefits of the Internet**

The Internet provides all its browsers with a world of exciting opportunities. It offers:

### **Individual Empowerment**

- ✓ The Internet presents a new tool to improve lives through informational possibilities offered for personal and social empowerment. Individuals have always used technologies to improve and make the most of their lives—making life more efficient, safer, and more interesting, or in other ways facilitating the achievement of goals. We use calculators to ensure accuracy and save time, the telephone to communicate, and television to gather news and to relax. All these can be achieved through the Internet at a go.
- ✓ The Internet differs from other technologies in its potential to transform our lives. Options such as the Internet give individuals unprecedented autonomy to meet unique wants and needs. Never before has one single technology enabled us to shop, go to the movies, get up-to-the-minute news, make and enjoy friendships, engage in discussions about issues, conduct research in libraries, and gather a wide range of information on any interest or need—without leaving home.
- ✓ Perhaps the most important quality of the Internet is that it is the most dynamic and wide-ranging interactive mass medium in history. You decide what you want to do on it, when you want to do it, whether you want to do it alone or with others, and so forth.
- ✓ As the number of on-line users continues to grow at an exceedingly fast pace, the Internet has become the one marketing medium that no company can afford to ignore. Communication over the Internet allows companies to utilize an interactive, customized, on-demand, multifaceted medium. The Internet also helps the company develop a strong relationship with clients or customers based on the exchange of information.
- ✓ One of the more obvious benefits is that individuals and families can find a panorama of informational choices that reflect particular needs, special interests, and unique hobbies. Information quickly accessible over the Internet can help us grow as individuals by building opportunities. Combing through this constantly changing information,

we can determine what choices are available and what resources to rally in response. Interactive information experiences can enhance understanding of personal needs and prepare one for upcoming challenges. When new information found via the Internet is imaginatively connected with ideals, goals, hopes, feelings, and values, individuals can change their lives for the better.

- ✓ The Internet allows individuals to build their own expertise. Ordinary people can research libraries and informational sites and compare online advice given from a number of perspectives. People can exchange practical ideas and join online discussions with "kindred spirits" who have similar situations or interests. The Internet enables information-gathering across the world without traditional barriers of distance, time, and sometimes cost.
- ✓ The Internet can provide ordinary people with new opportunities to become "subjects" of their own lives rather than "objects" used by others. As a tool for "creative play," the Internet can become an important venue to resist entrenched and oppressive ways of thinking. The Internet can potentially nourish imaginations and deepen emotional commitment to visionary ideas. Individuals and families can join discussion groups around social issues, publish their own work, or inform others about home-based businesses and grassroots action groups.
- ✓ More specifically, the Internet disembodies the mind from gender, class, ethnicity, and other characteristics too often used to marginalize and discriminate against people. Most physical disabilities are rendered irrelevant. Because individuals "represent" rather than "present" themselves on the computer, we are encouraged to consider the hardiness of our concepts over any physical biases. The Internet increases the power of individuals to insert their voices and ideas into the public arena of cyberspace—and be judged according to the merit of their ideas.

## Social Empowerment

- If profuse links are the defining characteristic of the Information Age, then the Internet offers profuse opportunities to participate in a global dialogue. Perhaps the greatest benefit of the Internet is the opportunity to create widespread interchange of ideas and build far-reaching relationships among diverse people over the entire world.
- Something entirely new is wrapped around our planet—a way for one person to communicate with many at a very low cost, regardless of where they are in time or space. Spontaneously and with little planning, a global conversation and an information freeway have erupted in less than a decade, making next-door neighbours of people in Kainji, Jebba, Kano, India, far away USA, in fact the whole world.
- All people who can get online have, at their fingertips, the power to enter a new social arena for dialogue. The 'magic' of the Internet is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of the participants. The Internet can bring together ordinary individuals to exchange ideas about political issues. Individuals can state opinions and request feedback to grow in social understanding. They can participate in moderated discussions in which everyone in the "audience" can "speak" and add to public meaning. Schools, business people, professionals, workers, or researchers can conduct projects with groups from across the world—sharing interests and problems and generating new ideas as a global team.
- With near primitive conditions of a frontier, the Internet is just such a world without boundaries. Individuals can overcome physical limits, and online communities can evolve in grassroots fashion to address almost any human challenge.
- When people are online, they're reading, thinking, analyzing, criticizing and authenticating - composing their thoughts. Here technology is used to play, learn, communicate and form relationships as people always have. Development is enhanced in an interactive world.

With all these in mind, we can say that people who do not have easy access to computers, knowledge of the Internet, and related technological competence miss out on these opportunities to actively participate in the transformation of their own lives and culture.

## CAUTIONS

There are no regulations or controls on the material that is placed on the Internet. New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think about. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think with. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop. The Internet, as a new technology does the same.

- Creative autonomy, intellectual depth, and dialogical development of meaning are fundamental to personal empowerment. However, the Internet can undermine the development of these reflective abilities. Technologies such as the Internet can come to dictate one's perception of reality and to dominate every sphere of life. Because information comes to us quickly "one screen" at a time, we come to view the "best" knowledge as that which is packaged into lively, entertaining and instantly gratifying forms. Individuals can become unthinking consumers of the electronically-produced meanings flowing over the Internet. They can become beguiled by sophisticated images, leaving little desire to creativity.
- The individual on the Internet also works alone without tangible social context. This type of autonomy can disintegrate into self-absorption without fear of social critique and grounded consequences.
- Particularly troublesome to the formation of identity is the way that young people are being shaped by the Internet. The entertainment and information options of technologies like the Internet support, enhance, and increasingly define their identities. There is danger that young people can become so intent upon exciting and multiple information experiences that they fail to become involved in the situated, grounded experiences necessary to learn how to make reflective, creative, and wise choices.

- Because the Internet makes it relatively easy for creators of information to mass-produce hidden agendas, distort ideas, and manipulate receivers, impressionable youths are vulnerable to uncritical acceptance of oppressive ideologies.
  
- Our computer-driven society demands that students develop the ability to operate in a technological environment, acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to be productive. In addition, so much of our planet is rapidly becoming connected via the Internet that online protocol has become an intrinsic part of technology-based curriculum. But increasing reports connecting psychologically addictive characteristics to Internet use, along with speculation of its negative influence on social functioning has brought to question the enduring effects of this reform. Educators and psychologists are beginning to wonder about the impact of the Internet on the social skills and psychological well-being of people, especially the children. Online computer use is widespread and growing. Current estimates indicate that 149 million people are online worldwide, and that number is increasing at the rate of 12% a month.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup> The Internet itself is so compelling to some people that they fall victim to a new dependency, **cyberaddiction**.
  
- While our culture heralds the Internet as a technological wonder, there are suggestions that Internet use has a negative influence on individuals and their social skills. Data showed that as people in this sample used the Internet more, they reported keeping up with fewer friends. They also reported spending less time talking with their families, experiencing more daily stress, and feeling more lonely and depressed. These results occurred even though interpersonal communication was their most important reason for using the Internet. But the suggestive ill effects of Internet use do not stop at the secondary school level. At a large university in New York, the dropout rate among freshmen newcomers rose dramatically as their investment in computers and Internet access increased. The reason? Administrators learned that "43% of the dropouts were staying up all night on the Internet."<sup>6</sup>

- Pedophiles and child pornographers (*See Table 1 for statistics*) lurk online in effort to entice children into dangerous conversation and action; militant groups publish materials promoting "cyberhate" or actual tools of violence; "cyberaffairs" blossom online; verbal harassment occurs; and misinformation abounds on every issue from dieting to child raising. As a world that is totally free of censorship, People, outside the confines of law, place on the Internet whatever they want in the way of text, still images, and video.
  
- In a study<sup>7</sup>, it was found that teenagers are much heavier Internet users than their parents. While adults tend to use the Internet as part of their jobs and to get employment-related information, teenagers were more likely to use the Internet to play games, to listen to music, and to meet new people. Many have taken the view that media and technology -- including television, motion pictures, and CD recordings -- have deteriorated the values and social functioning of our youth. The Internet is a prime culprit for this affliction with its innate game-playing capabilities, suspected addictive tendencies, and beckoning sexually-explicit temptations.<sup>8</sup>
  
- There are threats of Viruses, Spasms (unsolicited advertising), Worms, Trojans and Flawed softwares. The academic rebels write all these 'evil' programs to destroy computers and their operating systems/application softwares, especially their executable files. Unlike viruses worms may enter your computer while you are hooked up to the Internet without any connection to e-mail messages or e-mail use. Residing on your computer, if not detected by an excellent and up-to-date antivirus program, they will then become activated by any of a great number of triggers when you next turn on your machine or reboot it. Perhaps according to a particular date. They may then make your machine make noises, attach themselves to files on your computer already, attach to and assume the name of attachments you are receiving by e-mail, or occupy your computer resources and slow your machine while filling your memory or storage.
  
- E-mail spoofing. E-mail spoofing is the forgery of an e-mail header so that the message appears to have originated from someone or

somewhere other than the actual source. This will usually occur if someone you know has been infected with a virus and they have your address in their address book. This type of spam is often used in an attempt to get recipients to open, and possibly infect their system. The best course of action would be to delete these e-mails and never open any e-mails that you are unsure about.

- Risk of personal health through excessive use. The internet can become addictive. It is important that the Internet is not used to the exclusion of other developmentally appropriate tasks including, the need to be physically active.

## **PANACEA**

There are several things that can be done to help counteract the dangers of the Internet while allowing the use of its benefits:

### **Learn more about it yourself**

The more you know about the internet, the more support you will be able to provide for self and others. Many local libraries, schools and other community groups offer free courses or courses at reasonable prices. You don't have to become an expert, but some degree of comfort with the technology will help.

### **Know what you want to do on the Internet**

Determine what you want to do on the Internet and stick to it. For young people, their parents can help monitor the websites they visit by:

checking Bookmarks or Favorites (accessible via the icons on the menu bar) for sites they like to visit often

checking recently visited sites (using Options, Preference or History)

use monitoring software. One such product, released in 2003 is called SimGuard. This product enables parents to keep a record of a child's web browsing habits. (For more information go to the SimGuard website: <http://www.simguard.net>)

email monitoring software is also available. KidSafe is an example of email monitoring software. It allows parents to filter email for their children to block out spam, viruses and offensive emails. (For more information go to the KidSafe website: <http://www.kidsafe.net.au/> )

### **Learn to be critical users of the internet**

One of the best ways of protecting yourself is to be a critical user of the Internet. Never give others your name, the names of your friends, or fill in questionnaires with your personal details never to send images of self (pictures) over the Net as they may be used for other purposes.

- never respond to messages or bulletin board items that are suggestive, obscene, or threatening.

- always be yourself when on-line to be critical in respect of 'information' found on the internet. Information on the Internet comes from many sources and not all is reliable.

### **Use blocking software or filters**

Blocking software or filters are the names used for programs that you can install and use on your computer to control the information that you love to access whilst on the Internet.

Blocking software can block or minimise the risks of harmful violent material, sexually explicit material and chat lines being displayed on your computer (For more information visit [www.youngmedia.org.au](http://www.youngmedia.org.au)).

**NOTE:** Whilst blocking software is an excellent idea for some age groups it is not foolproof and some computer aware people can still get around these programs.

### **Put in place reasonable boundaries**

Determine for yourself reasonable boundaries on use of the Internet. Set a daily or weekly time limit. Remember that the Internet can be addictive and that you may need to keep a balance with other activities, including being physically active.

Make rules about on-line shopping, downloading material, responding to unsolicited advertisements and so on.

## CONCLUSION

Because the Internet is becoming a valued tool in everyday information experiences, and because it has the potential to become a potent metaphor and system to guide personal and social life, there is a pressing need for on-going critical assessment of the role of technology as a whole. Insofar as the Internet helps empower individuals, we have an obligation to integrate it into our professional practices.

In conclusion, today's society is in the middle of a technological boom. People can either choose to take advantage of this era, or simply let it pass them by. The Internet is a very powerful tool. It has many advantages; however, people need to be extremely aware of the disadvantages as well.

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**Table 1: 2004 finds the Internet with these purported statistics:**

<b>S/No</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2004</b>
1.	Internet Users with global access	10 million	1 billion
2.	Pornographic Websites	2,000	250,000
3.	Spam E-M ails	1%	55%
4.	Internet Viruses	60	6,000
5.	Worms and Trojans	10	1,200
6.	Occupational Dependency	2%	26%
7.	Computer Longevity	4 years	2 years

Source: "Getting the Most for Your Online Effort!" - <http://www.earthtym.net>