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The Internet: Friend, foe or target?

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8 The Internet: Friend, foe or target?

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1.   Introduction

While talking to a friend a few months ago, I heard a rather distressing story. Andrew, my friend who had just lost his 95-year old father, said this of his dad: "Apparently he was not significant in this life… because I did an Internet search on him and nothing showed up". Is our worth today measured in the number of search hits that appear about us on the Internet? In this respect, Michael Jaffarian's question in relation to the Internet, in chapter 4, "what will this do to us?", is rather insightful and penetrating.

In this concluding chapter, I give an overview of how the Internet, a byproduct of our times, is shaping our culture and society in profound ways. I note some of the major concerns and perils of the Internet age and I conclude by pointing out how and why certain countries are targeting the Internet in terms of increased regulation and surveillance.

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2.   A culture of technology

Each new medium brings with it a revolution which results in major changes in culture and in the organization of society (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982). The culture of our times influences the media of tomorrow. No medium exists in a vacuum. The need for instant communication, instant results and fast food reveals a culture that wants to get the most out of life in the quickest possible time frame using the fastest means available. Add this phenomenon to the technological inventions of the preceding generation (such as the newspaper, radio, television, etc.), and this provides the seed bed for the invention of a new medium relevant for the times (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982). The Internet, like every communication medium, is both a cause and effect of the times we live in. It was caused by the complex circumstances of modern times and, as an effect, it is impacting post-modern lives.

It is no coincidence that the Internet was developed initially as a military communications system[1]. This accounts for its logical operating system based on digital technology, its relative speed and the initial cloak of secrecy:

> "The Internet was first invented for military purposes, and then expanded to the purpose of communication among scientists. The invention also came about in part by the increasing need for computers in the 1960s. During the Cold War, it was essential to have communications links between military and university computers that would not be disrupted by bombs or enemy spies. In order to solve the problem, in 1968 DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) made contracts with BBN (Bolt, Beranek and Newman) to create ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network)" (Gharbawi, 1991, para. 3).

So from secretive communication within the military to guarded scientific inquiry, the Internet has become an everyday tool for the common person, to

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1. In the introductory chapter it was mentioned that electronic warfare would be the next phase of the Internet. If this happens, then the Internet would have come full circle –starting as a military communication tool and advancing to become a weapon to shut down the electronic technology of the enemy.

be used in homes, offices, businesses and factories as "the largest network of networks worldwide" (Gharbawi, 1991, para. 2). Internet technology has filtered down into the hands of the masses. Hence, the Internet age is a culture of technology, easily accessed and navigated by close to 3 billion people[1] (Internet World Stats website, 2014). Imagine how life would be without this medium of communication. Indeed, life and society today are organized around the Internet, and young children are acculturated into the culture of technology even before they learn the alphabet and are admitted into school.

The emergence of new gadgets, be it Smartphones, tablets, iPads or the like, has introduced a new way of life and indeed a new perception of life, but the impact of these on society remains to be fully grasped.

Internet technology is changing ever so rapidly (this could be another characteristic of the Internet age) and it seems that users are going along with the changes, but these changes have implications:

> "Unlike many previous technologies like the television or telephone, social media applications evolve far more quickly, often without warning and in ways that may have significant implications for users and their practices. Social media researchers may be halfway through data collection when they discover that an important feature has been redesigned or removed altogether" (Ellison & Boyd, 2013, p. 164).

3.   Major concerns

The virtues and potentials of the Internet are well known, and the foregoing chapters have clearly illustrated them. Groundbreaking studies on social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter have been undertaken (Park & Kastanis, 2009), and the educational benefits of the Internet are becoming more and more

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1. The world's population is approximately 7.2 billion people as of June, 2014, (Worldometers website, n.d.) so the Internet is still not accessible to large segments of the world. Technology must be aided by public policy to ensure that Internet education, facilities and access are equally available to all sectors of the community to prevent the phenomenon of 'digital divide' referred to in chapter 1 by Iremae D. Labucay.

apparent. Recently, Souleles (2012), used action research to study the effects of embedding Facebook in an undergraduate communications course where students identified several educational benefits, including useful feedback from both peers and teachers.

However, as foreshadowed in the introductory chapter, the Internet and all its multi-faceted platforms have brought a cluster of moral and ethical concerns. A selected list is briefly discussed below in the hope that it will serve as a catalyst for more sustained research in the near future.

3.1.   An era of post-privacy?

Teitelbaum (1996), in *Wired* magazine, made an astonishing statement about the realities of life in the Internet age: "Privacy is history –get over it".

Yet, according to a host of civil and political organizations,

> "[p]rivacy is a fundamental human right recognized in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and in many other international and regional treaties. Privacy underpins human dignity and other key values such as freedom of association and freedom of speech. It has become one of the most important human rights issues of the modern age" (GILC website, n.d.).

The paradox is that, unlike any other period in human history, today people are willingly revealing their most intimate and personal details via the Internet. The extraordinary growth of social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, have opened the door for people to reveal personal details in the public sphere. People are encouraged, and even given the 'start up' tools by social networking sites, to intentionally create profiles to communicate with and develop existing friendships, grow new relationships, and locate friends from the past. Sadly, some users naively treat sites such as Facebook as a private web paradise. As noted by Papacharissi (2011), "[t]echnology may provide the stage for this interaction, linking the individual, separately or simultaneously, with multiple

audiences. Online social networks constitute such sites of self presentation and identity negotiation" (p. 304).

Thus the projection of one's self, and the need to "keep up with the Joneses", overrides all other concerns, including privacy concerns, and as Tamir and Mitchell (2012) discovered, 80 percent of all blogs and posts in social media sites are in essence texts and images related to personal details, experiences and announcements. In short, self-disclosure constitutes the main content on social media. Apparently, the more you share the more you gain. However, with this 'sharing' comes a litany of potential dangers, such as privacy invasion, loss of confidentiality, damage to reputation, and even identity theft.

Nissenbaum (2010) has revealed that search engine companies routinely keep a log of all searches for a period of time and that various governments, including the USA, have been known to subpoena these companies during critical times for records of certain users and searches.

Tavani (2012) goes a step further to argue that individual searches made by users can easily be converted into profiles that could be potentially sold to commercial companies, thus revealing the dark side of what could happen in our merged technological and capitalistic society. Recently, it was revealed that Facebook has a fairly large group of in-house researchers who routinely dig into Facebook's database of approximately 1.3 billion users to study trends in user content and other related matters (Albergotti, 2014). Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is commonplace for employers and recruiters to use Facebook and other social media platforms to make assessments of current and would-be employees.

Vaidhyanathan (2011) warns of the hidden dangers of "Googlization":

> "we are not Google's customers: we are its product. We –our fancies, fetishes, predilections, and preferences– are what Google sells to advertisers. When we use Google to find out things on the Web, Google uses our Web searches to find out things about us" (p. 3).

A related issue as pointed out by Nicola Johnson in chapter 7 is this: is our Internet footprint permanent? Hence we can expect that privacy concerns and the protection of our personal information, together with litigation cases, will become more and more prominent in the digital age. Critical studies on the Internet seek to address these issues:

> "a critical contribution to Internet privacy studies makes an effort to the individual role of control and choice as well as to the constraining effects of social structures on Web 2.0 platforms and social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, YouTube, and Blogger. It furthermore investigates the principle of Web 2.0 platforms, that is the massive provision and storage of personal identifiable data that are systematically evaluated, marketed, and used for targeted advertising […]. A critical notion of Internet privacy wants to put privacy threats and ownership structures of such commercial platforms into the larger context of societal problems in public discourse" (Allmer, 2013, section 5).

Therefore, it is important for users to be aware of the ethical and legal implications of self-disclosure and for Internet agencies and social media sites to have clear and transparent policies in place.

3.2.   'Anti social' media?

Picture a typical family of four in the USA or any first-world nation having dinner at a restaurant. Each one is engaged with his or her own Smartphone and iPad answering emails, involved in games, listening to music, or messaging and exchanging photographs. In this scenario, the family members are indeed 'connecting', but not with one another as members of a family.

The function of social media is to connect people, and users of Facebook and other platforms are known to have many 'friends'. However quantity seems to override quality in these relationships and closeness does not seem to be achieved, because each user constantly looks for "one more friend" to add.

Because an average Facebook user has 300-500 friends, this begs the question: are they real friends?

FriendFolio is a new and daring game purporting to find out how much our friends on social sites are worth and how that value can be added to the user:

> "If you have quite a few friends on Facebook, FriendFolio […] wants to be your guide as to how much they're worth. Launched by London-based application builder BAPPZ, FriendFolio does on the Web precisely what investors in the real world cannot do, which is: buy, sell, and trade friends. (At least not overtly, anyway.) That's right, no more equality for all […]. The developers behind FriendFolio consider it Facebook users' right to place one another on a marketplace gauged in dollars and cents and strategize their way to higher-than-thou status.

> Want to get rich? You sure can. By playing your ambition card(s) especially well with those carefully honed skills derived from countless hours passing go on [sic] within that capitalistic wonderworld called Monopoly –plus a good amount of 'friendly' exploitation– you can build quite an impressive portfolio of Facebook associates through FriendFolio that the application's developers would like to describe as nothing less than a game for beautiful people, CEOs, and Apprentice hopefuls" (Glazowski, 2008, para. 2-3).

3.3. 'Selfies' and narcissism

A new word has been coined for a phenomenon that has come into being on the Internet –the growing number of 'selfies'. A 'selfie' "is a picture of yourself [taken by you] usually shared on any social networking website" (Moreau, n.d., para. 2). Moreau (n.d.) also goes on to suggest several reasons why this trend of posting self-taken photos is growing;

- to get attention from as many people as possible;
- to get a self-esteem boost;

- to show off;
- to get a specific person's attention;
- boredom;
- because social media is fun.

Are social media sites pandering to the narcissistic nature of post-modern people where 'self' has become the new focus? Twitter is a micro blogging site where people share frequently about such things as where they have been, what they have eaten, what books they have read and what they have achieved. Thus, the 'followers', who read a particular tweet, get to hear about all the trivial and mundane details of a person's activities.

The university of Salford in the UK did a study on social media's effects on a person's self-esteem with the following results:

> "50% of their 298 participants said that their use of social networks like Facebook and Twitter makes their lives worse […]. In addition to this, a quarter of participants cited work or relationship difficulties because of 'online confrontations', and more than half reported that they feel 'worried or uncomfortable' when they can't access Facebook or email. In sum, this study concluded that social media causes low self-esteem and anxiety" (Soltero, n.d., para. 2).

If our sense of identity and worth is constantly impacted and measured by what other people are doing as they continuously post images, updates, events and tweets on social sites, then people could be setting themselves up for failure and emotional distress.

3.4. Ambiguity

Anyone today can start up a website, post a blog, or become a member of an interactive community. Even terrorist organizations use social media platforms and have their own websites. This sense of democracy and egalitarianism is to be celebrated, but the downside is that there may be a sense of ambiguity for the

everyday user who is confused by the multiplicity and sometimes conflicting accounts of views or information on any given issue. Therefore, the 'wisdom of the masses' in this instance may be inconsequential or even harmful. This in no way contradicts Levy's (1997) findings that the Internet introduces "the construction of intelligent communities in which social and cognitive potential can be mutually developed" (p. 17). It merely shows that the cacophony of voices in cyberspace is a reality and users need wisdom and insight to make correct judgments.

Köerner (n.d.) gives a personalized account of how the Internet can entice a person to search and browse from one website to another –creating almost a form of addiction, or 'electronic narcotics':

> "Spend thirty minutes 'surfing the web' and do your best to retain your sense of self. The more I aimlessly wander down the rabbit holes of media that prostitute themselves across my screen, the more I degenerate into a glazed-over zombie, hungry and manic yet lacking any sense of purpose. In this state of mind, it's easier to be pulled into the downward spiral than to slap myself awake, and I quickly feel full and exhausted by the wretchedness of all that I have consumed" (Köerner, n.d., para. 1).

We referred earlier in the introductory chapter to Suler's (2004) study on disinhibition; the above comments make sense when seen in the light of his psychological study.

3.5.   'Communication overload'

The preponderance of emails, text messages, blogs, Facebook notifications and the like are all adding to a condition of 'communication overload'. This phenomenon of continuous communication is illustrated in this striking set of research statistics: in 2012, an average of 144 billion emails were sent per day, together with 1 billion Facebook messages or updates and 47 billion instant text messages (Cirius website, 2012; Radicati, 2012). Think of the time an average person spends on any given day deleting unwanted,

insignificant or dated emails, text messages, social media updates, invitations and the like.

Our lives are changing but, more importantly, our perception of life may also be affected in the process. Psychologist Cook (2014) highlights what she terms 'emerging adults', and explains this by giving a scenario of a 27-year-old child who plays video games on the computer in his pajamas most of the day. Therefore, growing up in this culture of technology can pose unique challenges for both parents and children:

> "Our private sphere has ceased to be the stage where drama of the subject at odds with his objects and with his image is played out: we no longer exist as playwrights or actors but as terminals of multiple networks" (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 16).

3.6.   Fragmentation

As mentioned earlier, anyone and everyone can potentially launch their own website to promote their own views, hobbies, political ideas, religious beliefs, values and judgments. Hence, the Internet can become "all things to all people". In time, people with particular tastes and views may, by choice, only log onto the sites that reinforce their particular views and tastes. The Internet may follow the way of established media such as TV and radio, which have moved from traditional broadcasting to 'narrowcasting'. A narrow cast is defined as data being sent to

> "a specific list of recipients. Cable television is an example of narrowcasting since the cable TV signals are sent only to homes that have subscribed to the cable service. In contrast, network TV uses a broadcast model in which the signals are transmitted everywhere and anyone with an antenna can receive them" (Webopedia website, n.d.).

In light of the perils of the Internet, and the fact that human nature (which is responsible for many of the dark aspects of the Internet) is not likely to change,

we believe that what is needed is for schools, institutions and community groups to create or weave into existing curricula a comprehensive manual for educating people in navigating and negotiating life on the Internet, with learning goals such as these to

- discover sensible ways to handle the Internet;

- acquire wisdom and guidance to be aware of the Internet's dark side (it can be argued that whereas 'information' and facts can be quickly 'googled', wisdom does not come that easily with the click of a browser);

- have access to preventive measures for Internet addiction and communication overload;

- lead a balanced life which also includes time for outdoor activities, face-to-face interaction with family and friends, etc.

Many of the resources for such goals are already available online and the research done by psychologists, such as Suler (2004), Barak and Suler (2008), Finfgeld (1999) and Cook (2014) are useful starting points.

4. Internet - the target of certain nations

Social networking sites and related platforms have been used successfully by citizens to topple governments and overturn policies in countries such as Iran, Egypt and Colombia. As a backlash, repressive regimes such as China, North Korea and Vietnam seem to be tightening their grip on Internet surveillance.

Internet usage around the world is increasing. Asia, with its teeming population, is leading the way in Internet usage and is poised for explosive growth in the coming years. China, the most populous nation in the world, has approximately 600 million Internet users, with an Internet penetration of nearly 45 percent (Reporters without Borders website, n.d.).

Even so, we recognize that an increase in Internet usage does not guarantee democratization, as some countries are wrestling with the Internet and have strong regulations in place. In the introductory chapter, we gave six characteristics of the Internet, and it seems likely that another characteristic needs to be mentioned: the Internet is built on openness and the democratic principle that everyone is able to access a free flow of information. Social media promotes this principle by giving people a voice so that opinions and views can be exchanged. It is therefore not surprising that the democratic nature of the Internet poses a threat to authoritarian regimes whose ideologies are based on the notion that absolute power should rest in the hands of those in political leadership.

China leads the way in the art of Internet surveillance with its infamous "Great Firewall of China", a term used to refer to China's massive Internet filtering and censorship system. The Chinese Communist Party has judiciously licensed eight service providers for this nation of 1.3 billion people (Reporters without Borders website, n.d.). In China, there are at least five government departments that are involved in censorship and surveillance of the Internet on a multi-layered basis (Reporters without Borders website, n.d.). In addition, there is a special Internet police force to monitor what the public is posting on the net through any Internet platforms. This is all part of a larger plan to control the Internet in this nation:

> "criminal statutes were revised to allow for the prosecution of online subversion, limiting direct foreign investment in Internet companies and requiring companies to register with the information that might harm unification of the country, endanger national security, or subvert the government. Promoting 'evil cults' (an obvious reference to Beijing's campaign against Falun Gong) was similarly banned, along with anything that 'disturbs social order'" (Press Reference website, n.d.).

The level of censorship is so extensive in China that even the Internet Search giant Google left Mainland China in 2010 and moved its China operations to Hong Kong[1] (Helft, 2010).

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1. Hong Kong used to be a British colony until 1997 when it was returned to Chinese hands. Since the return, Hong Kong remains as a Special Administrative Region of China (SAR), and retains its capitalistic economy and a certain measure of its democratic policies.

Wong (2010), from the Center of Democracy and Technology, describes how China's Government has successfully used the Internet for its own ends, thus providing a 'model' for other authoritarian nations:

> "China and other regimes have demonstrated that the internet can be introduced into the population without functioning as a liberalizing force. In fact, the Chinese government frequently employs the [I]nternet to shape political debates" (para. 5).

Harvard scholar Penney (2013) summarizes the situation in China, suggesting that even in this repressive system there may be creative ways to overcome controls and, perhaps, a window of opportunity for a change of sorts:

> "The scale and penetration of internet use among Chinese citizens is extraordinary, and there are only so many internet police and web commentators you can hire to contain 'problematic' internet content. It also means that more Chinese citizens will gain the technical knowledge to find more means to circumvent filtering methods. These are definitely interesting times" (last para.).

5.   Conclusion

The Internet is a friend to many people, a foe to some, and a target for a few repressive governments. Notwithstanding, the Internet, according to many experts, will flourish and become more and more interwoven into the very fabric of our lives. The Pew Research Center and Elon University study, which interviewed several experts, found that the Internet "will become like electricity during the next decade, less visible but more important and embedded in everyday life" (Shirvell, 2014, para. 5). The study also revealed that there were as many negatives as positives, because people today are becoming more aware of the perils of the Internet: "[t]hey worry about interpersonal ethics, surveillance, terror and crime and the inevitable backlash as governments and industry try to adjust" (Shirvell, 2014, para. 8).

We started this book with a reference to the Internet's 25th anniversary in 2014. The results of the European Union study, which look futuristically to the Internet's next 15 years, is a fitting way to conclude the book:

> "If the Internet could wish for anything on its 40th birthday, it would probably ask to be more powerful, connected and intuitive –responding to our needs at home, work or on the go […]. This is how the future internet is evolving: as an internet of services, things and infrastructure. From smart appliances that talk to each other to clothes that monitor our health; from cars that cannot crash to mobile technologies and cloud platforms that run our businesses" (Digital Agenda for Europe website, n.d.).

Get ready for life in an incredibly more digitalized world!

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