

'Because the Internet'¹

A look at the individual and global issues arising from communications in the Internet Age

Summary

The Internet, though a boon in many spheres of human life, is also creating the most perplexing social and political global challenges facing humanity in our times. The systemic issues caused by and surrounding Internet usage may be looked at from the philosophical and sociological points of view. If the aim of human existence is 'progress', and some of its markers are ensuring justice, equality and freedom, and a beneficial quality of life, then what is the Internet's role in advancing or regressing it?

Introduction

There are currently over 4.66 billion active Internet users worldwide, and 63.2 percent of the entire world's population has Internet access. The average user spends 6.30 hours on the Internet daily. Around 54.6 percent of the global population uses mobile phones.²

Conversations about the Internet are now commonplace —at social gatherings, over a drink at the pub or even at the park on a Sunday. These exchanges are general and rarely at fever pitch because humans discuss and interact so much with digital reality that a version of Overton's window is at work.³ In just a couple of decades, the 'Net' has become part of everyday life. Yet if one were to view the subject objectively, the words would come slower, almost in terrified awe. No man-made object serves as an analogy to this invention; it is truly an ocean. We do 'surf' the web, but it is impossible for the general user to perceive either its breadth or depth, or to realise its vast and insidious power over our lives.

The Physiology of the Net

For most people, The Internet is a *technology*, to be mastered in a practical way for everyday use. But any understanding of the Internet must begin from the perspective of *physiology*. The tool magnifies our biological or psychological desires and/or allows quicker access to fulfilling them. Users react to the Internet on this 'basic' level, and it is on this level that its influence runs deep.

Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist, speaks of the Middle World,⁴ which describes the realm we inhabit between the microscopic world of quarks and atoms and the cosmic world of stars and galaxies. This notion applies to the idea of the Internet, as it is difficult for us to visualize any object or phenomenon on such a grand or small scale, because the human mind is evolved to understand best what it routinely encounters. The scale of a hundred billion dollars or the distance to another planet eludes us almost entirely, although we may understand the numbers and therefore enjoy sci-fi movies or scroll news of bank scams. So for the average user to imagine the scale of the Internet and comprehend its immense potential to affect our lives cannot really happen.

Looking at it from the biological or physiological angle, the three 'As of Internet use are:

1. Amplification

Never before have the voices of the public been so amplified and made accessible, so that both sides to any subject, idea, notion or opinion may a) immediately know of each other's existence, but nothing about each other b) take instant pleasure or offence c) attempt to shower praise or shout each other down. The process of deliberation and thought checking enforced by any slower means of communication has been compromised, perhaps forever. On any given moment, not even day, there is incessant 'debate' around societal, economic and political problems. But there are no rules or structure to such conversations, and hence there is rarely a conclusion, with the obvious byproduct of heightened tension and anger among the numerous commentators who are attached to mile-long 'threads'.

Are humans designed to function well at this level of heightened, amplified conversation? This would seem to be a problem, given the escalating rate of personal and community tensions around the world.

2. Algorithms

To this chaos of communicative misrepresentation and misunderstanding, we must add the feverish fuel of algorithms designed to trick users' brains into increasing the amount of time they spend on a given platform, particularly social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Launched with the stated objectives of expanding social networks, personal associations, and general affability, these platforms have actually fostered anxiety, lessened genuine human interaction, polarized thought, and decreased the ability to make informed decisions. And yet, they are addictive, particularly in times of the COVID 19 pandemic when people have been forced to keep a distance. The average user spends 6.30 hours on the Internet daily—a figure that can vary according to region, income, demography and access—but it is indicative of a growing trend.

3. Adulthood

Finally, there is no denying that we are now at the beginning of the actual Internet Age. The last two decades have seen an infrastructure boost that has put devices in the pockets of billions of users. A fledgling invention is now in its subjective teens—what kind of an adult will it be? A cursory examination brings up concerns of user data manipulation, algorithms designed to swing elections, boost corporate agendas, or aggravate simmering class and ethnic tensions—there is no clear direction for how this technology will or should mature.

'The Language of Earth'

There is no clear or immediately apparent resolution to the ramifications of an untrammelled internet. Can the Internet be switched off? Even though the idea periodically surfaces, it is clearly improbable and untenable. The benefits of the World Wide Web are manifold and unquestionable, and its presence in our lives is irreversible. It has added enormously to human knowledge, technology and science. Businesses big and small in every sector of commerce and industry depend on the Internet. In the words of Childish Gambino while explaining the title of his 2013 album:

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"Because the Internet' I'm here, because of the Internet we're all here. It's the language of Earth. Everyone keeps saying by this or that year, Mandarin or Spanish will be the most dominant language, but the Internet is already a language we are all connected to; even my dad can understand the meme format. But the thing is, there are no rules, which is also the awesome thing."⁵

For most users, social media platforms are synonymous with the Internet. Which leads us into the contentious realm of tech giants such as Google, Facebook and Twitter that have not only created applications designed to increase usage but also gone ahead and onboarded millions of new users. It also brings to mind disturbing issues of algorithms designed to direct users along certain paths of thought or action, generation of 'fake news', and the rise of influencer based marketing. The recent US election campaign with its incendiary conclusion at Capitol Hill is an example of mass action through digital platforms. Another example currently playing out is about COVID-19 vaccine safety. In a similar way, all topics big or small, generate huge amounts of unregulated conversation, eventually leading to individual choices and their consequences.

In general, it would seem that humans do not seem to be coping, or haven't had the time to learn how to cope, with this communications technology. It has contributed to social conflict and violence, as well as mental health problems stemming from overstimulation and excessive, unfiltered and unverified information. It could be debated that regardless of the progress this technology has allowed us, in its current form it has subtracted an equivalent or greater amount from the sum total of our attempts at civilizational ethics and a beneficial quality of life.

Order vs. Chaos

Is it possible to reset the controls of this 24-hour information highway? Which is not to say that the technology should not be used at all, only that its usage be more regulated and managed. These efforts usually by individual governments have to face the issues of Internet freedom, legal disputes with international tech giants and the sheer impossibility of controlling a vast information network that transcends all political boundaries. The scale of the World Wide Web defies control. It is truly the ocean, lapping at every human shore.

Crucially, as yet, there is as yet no system in place to educate existing users, and also newer generations as to how to use the Internet. This may seem like an improbable or even impossible task, given the very nature of the Internet, but yet it seems worthy of attempt—to work from the individual outwards to finally encompass societies and nations. The idea does appear ludicrous, even more so than shutting off the Internet, but perhaps it will be the most logical option for the future. Reason vs. Emotion has always been the existential dilemma of the human condition, and it is magnified a billion-fold by the arrival of the Internet Age. Can the power of reason be applied now over the imperatives of biology and psychology to bring order to the chaos of the Internet, or is entropy inevitable?

Conclusion

To sum up, the digital world though massive in its impact, is still a young technology. In the approximately 5000 years of recorded history, our species has only had this expertise for the last two decades. Yet in such a short time, this know-how has become the primary means of personal and professional interaction, and of governance. The average user cannot perceive its scale and scope in real terms. Its very nature allows for unchecked use, as it operated on the apparent or the obvious level, as well as the hidden, coded layer. **The question needs to be asked: If the aim of**

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human existence is ‘progress’, and some of its markers are ensuring justice, equality and freedom and a beneficial quality of life, then what is the internet’s role in enabling or disabling that?

In recent months, there are states are seeking to rein in corporate giants, or to take up matters of privacy and security. Along with this, it may also be the time to measure, analyze and question its pervasive power and influence on our individual thoughts and actions. It is important not only to facilitate freer usage of the Internet and to create better regulation, but also reevaluate its role in our lives so as to clearly understand the tool itself.

¹ ‘Because the Internet’ is the title of the second studio album released in 2013 by recording artist Donald Glover, known by his stage name of Childish Gambino. He explained the title by calling the Internet the “ the language of earth”.

² <https://www.internetlivestats.com/>
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>

³ Overton's Window is a model for understanding how concepts in society change over time and affect political thinking and agendas. It is also called the ‘window of discourse’. It is named after the American policy analyst, Joseph P. Overton.

⁴ *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins, 2006, Bantam Books.

⁵ Childish Gambino, ‘Because the Internet’, Album title, 2013.