

Social Media: A Tool or a Weapon?

Social media has become society's knife. It can be used as a valuable aid, but it can also be used as a detrimental weapon. If the majority of the world's populace utilized this tool as a weapon, society's destruction would be imminent. However, if everyone recognized its proper use, society would progress. Although social networking sites can harm society if used improperly, it is more important to acknowledge that, when used properly, social media provides social benefits that can better society.

Some teenagers use social media improperly by sharing information they should not share. Oftentimes, talking and sharing content in private chats or on private social media accounts gives teenagers a false sense of comfort thinking that they will not be caught (Homayoun). This feeling leads them to imprudent behaviors such as saying or sending offensive or inappropriate material. As they continue these behaviors without receiving punishment, they may exclusively use social media as a way to secretly go against their parents' rules. Unfortunately, teenagers are only one of the groups of people that misuse social media. Disinformation propagators use social media to spread harmful lies. Some social media sites gather information about their users, identify like-minded groups of people, and later sell that information to disinformation propagators who spread lies to those same people through social media (Ghosh and Scott). Social media is a simple way for these propagators to spread harmful disinformation because they can issue false ideas through fake posts and advertisements. Since the advent of social media, people have become used to receiving immediate information. Because of this, they tend to believe everything they see, including disinformation.

Of course, this misuse of such a widely-used platform undoubtedly brings harm to society. Teenagers can be harmed by their misuse of social media with real-life consequences.

Ana Homayoun from the *New York Times* reports that at least ten students who were found to be sharing offensive images within a private chat had their admissions offers from Harvard University rescinded. Although very few teenagers face such extreme consequences, many, if not all, teenagers who share offensive or inappropriate content are at risk of detrimental outcomes. Not only may a school punish a student who behaves with such recklessness, but parents and peers may react disdainfully once a teen's private actions become public. The instantaneous spread of information on social media is not exclusively harming individuals; it is harming society as a whole. The threat that social media poses on the world's politics is colossal due to the spread of disinformation. According to Dipayan Ghosh and Ben Scott from *TIME*, disinformation tactics work efficiently enough for "a fake news story [to be pushed] to the top of the Google results...misinforming a great many internet users." By misinforming the masses, disinformation rapidly has an adverse effect on politics around the world. The abundance of lies permeating society leaves civilians unable to find the truth, thus unable to form the opinions required to vote ably in government.

Although it is disheartening that there are groups of people who use social media for the wrong reasons, there are more people who use it properly. Campaigns advocating against negative social aspects are able to harness social media's influential power to help their cause. Victoria Betton and others from *The British Journal of Psychiatry* have found that a person's peers are more likely to cause someone to change their attitude than an organization would be able to (444). Users of social media have the ability to share or even create their own posts regarding their opinion on certain topics, such as stigma and discrimination. That user's followers, who are typically their friends or peers, will then see this post and share it if they agree with it. This becomes a cycle that eventually reaches more people than possible if simply

done through a single organization, therefore producing more change. Though they are common, user-created posts are not the only content people may access through social media. Children can benefit from new information accessible through social media. In her article from *The Conversation*, Technology and Learning researcher from Western Sydney University Joanne Orlando explains that the vast number of topics accessible to children online offers them a chance to “be exposed to ‘insider’ knowledge” and can combine “factual information with shared reflection.” Such an abundance of information at the fingertips of children provides a great opportunity for them to use social media for educational purposes. Not only will children be learning information through social media, but children will also have a high chance of developing the skill of identifying false information if they continue to use social media throughout their life. If most members of society possess this skill, the threat that disinformation poses on the world’s politics can be eliminated. With these uses in mind, it is extremely important for children to use social media properly.

These proper uses of social media, as well as many of the other proper uses, benefit individuals and society as a whole. When a person uses social media as a platform to share their life with others, their self-confidence may be increased as a result. Chief Networking Officer at the *Fireball Network* Deena Baikowitz has noted that social media makes users “more memorable, relatable, interesting[,] and approachable” (qtd in Kerpen). By obtaining these qualities, individuals become more confident in themselves because people will begin to pay attention to them. After captivating audiences through posted content, individuals receive recognition and praise characterized by how people respond. If someone were to share a moment of their life that others relate to, that person becomes approachable in the sense that they are just like everyone else as opposed to an unrealistic figure in the media. All of these factors make

someone feel valued and therefore more confident as a result. Another way the proper use of social media benefits society is the way it connects people who live a great distance from each other. For example, someone who moves away from a loved one geographically can maintain that relationship online, and someone with no geographic proximity to a potential friend has the chance to form that new relationship online (Tufekci). In the past, when instant communication did not yet exist, separation meant long periods of social disconnection. Today, anyone is only an instant message away. With geographic location no longer disrupting socialization, people who do not share the same opinions or interests as their neighbors have the opportunity to form new connections with people around the world, and loved ones are able to stay in contact over long distances.

The negative aspects of the improper use of social media does not mean that society would be better without it, for the proper use of social media promotes a great society. However, that great society can still improve. By educating users on its proper use, the threats presented by social media can be prevented. This can be achieved by parents or guardians as well as peers through advice or through rules and expectations. Once society is sufficiently enlightened on the topic and social media is properly used worldwide, society will prosper.

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