

Is Social Media A Benefit To Society?

Social media has exploded in the last 10 years. In fact, the popularity of sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn have grown by 36% since 2008. On social sites users create biographical profiles, communicate with friends and strangers and share thoughts, photos and similar media. Proponents of social networking sites claim that online communities increase interaction with friends and family, share valuable information and facilitate social and political change.

Opponents of social networking state that sites prevent face-to-face communication, waste time on frivolous activity and alter behavior. This essay will examine both the arguments for and against whether social media is good for society, and put forward the proposal that it is beneficial for society. For the purpose of this paper, social networking sites (SNS), social media sites (SMS), and social networks (SN) will be used inter-changeably but will carry the same meaning.

There is a significant amount of evidence that supports the notion of social media being a benefit for society. This first main benefit is that social media sites spread information faster than any other media. Recent research by Kidwali & Imperatore (2016) highlight that over 50% of people learn about breaking news from SMS and more importantly 65% of traditional media journalists and editors use sites like Facebook and LinkedIn for story research.

A second significant benefit is that social media is an effective method of creating employment. Employers use social networks to advertise or find employees because they offer a wider pool of applicants and more efficient searching capabilities. To illustrate this point, 64% of companies are on two or more social networks and over 89% of these companies hired through LinkedIn.

A final point is that SMS are a benefit for the economy. This divides into two main areas of political and financial. In the political arena, SNS have increased voters' participation. Facebook users have reported that communication between friends on political issues and campaigns have aroused more interest and been more persuasive in encouraging people to vote than in the past. For example, during the recent Brexit votes (in the UK, 2016), the readily available information and sharing of views on Social sites encouraged 20% more people to vote.

With regards to the financial benefits of SMS, the SN industry generates up to £1.3trillion to the economy every year (ibid) and provides thousands of jobs. Overall, the immense amount of available information shared and positive benefits for the economy highlight the significance of SNS. There is also

evidence that suggests SNS are not beneficial to society and in fact are weakening communities and creating an isolated generation.

The first main detrimental effect of SNS is information sharing. Much of the information being shared on these sites is not always true, but people's personal opinions written as facts. As a consequence, it can be difficult to distinguish the difference.

Many social network users fail to realize that SNS lack privacy controls and any personal information posted can be accessed and used by anyone. In a recent survey by Boyd & Hargittai (2015), 13 million Facebook users were unaware of Facebook's privacy policy. Of course, sharing media content information such as video, music and documents can infringe copyrights and cause artists, musicians and writers to lose income. It has been estimated that over £10bn is loss through SN piracy.