

Perceived Benefits of the Internet to Culture and Society

The benefits of the Internet that are mentioned most frequently are its perceived benefits as a means to information, communication, commerce, entertainment, and social interaction. These are all functional aspects of the internet: most of its applications and services have been designed explicitly to serve such functions, and many people that the Internet successfully performs these functions. In addition, the Internet has been claimed to have benefits that are less intentional: benefits to individual development and cultural understanding, particularly. The following list of major perceived benefits is suggestive but not exhaustive:

1. *Access to information.* The Internet makes a vast amount of information available, from a plurality of information sources, and makes it continuously available, more or less independent of time and place. Adequate information is of major importance to the successful functioning of (modern) individuals, and therefore any enhancement of the ability to acquire or access information can be seen as a great benefit to society.
2. *Information spreading.* The Internet makes it possible for anyone to quickly, easily and inexpensively post and disseminate information and make this information available to a large audience. In this way, the Internet promotes freedom of speech by enhancing the ability of individuals to voice opinions and inform and influence others, which can be considered a great benefit.
3. *Communication.* The Internet facilitates one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication and enables users to communicate easily and inexpensively with a wide variety of individuals across the globe. Communication goes beyond the dissemination of information: it is a two-way process that allows for the expression of viewpoints, the creation of intimacy, and the coordination of actions. Because communication is so important to individuals, the Internet's enhancement of the power to communicate can be considered a great benefit.
4. *Developing and maintaining social relations.* The internet facilitates the development and maintenance of social relations with people outside one's immediate vicinity, and provides added means to maintain relations with people in one's vicinity. Social relations are very important to the functioning of individuals and of society as a whole, and the Internet provides powerful means for developing and maintaining such relations, which is a great benefit.
5. *Community formation and social organization.* The internet facilitates the development and maintenance of communities of individuals with shared interests and concerns and the formation and maintenance of structured organizations with specific agendas. The Internet also provides new ways for

individuals to engage in collective behavior and form social movements. Community formation and social organization are important in any society, and any technology that provides new means to support these processes can be seen to provide important benefits.

6. *Production and Commerce.* The Internet enables new models for production by enabling coordination and partial automation of productive processes that span time and space. The Internet also enables new models for commerce, trade and business. These economic benefits translate into social and cultural benefits because they provide people with new products and services and faster and easier delivery of existing products and services at less cost.

7. *Leisure and entertainment.* The Internet enables new forms of leisure and entertainment, both for individual use and in interaction with others, such as playing games and providing forums for collectively practicing hobbies and for sharing and trading cultural objects like pictures, stories, drawings, software, music, and video.

8. *Identity formation and psychological development.* The Internet has been claimed to have positive effects on identity formation and psychological development by allowing people to experiment with alternative identities, to hide aspects of their identity that could meet with disapproval or stereotyping in face-to-face situations, to reveal aspects of themselves in relative anonymity, that they would not reveal in real life, and to expose themselves to a very broad variety of views and opinions (Turkle, 1995; Rheingold, 2000).

9. *Learning and cognitive development.* The Internet has been claimed to have beneficial effects on learning and cognitive development. It has been claimed that the Internet, and computers more generally, support interactive learning styles, enhances learning by supporting new multimedial ways of presenting information, and the development of good sensorimotor abilities (Van Dijk, 1999, p. 204-6).

10. *Cultural understanding.* It has been claimed that the Internet can promote a better understanding between cultures and cultural identities by enabling people from different cultural backgrounds and with different social and cultural identities to come together and communicate with each other under conditions that are conducive to cultural exchange (Ess and Sudweeks, 2001).

3. Perceived Harms of the Internet to Culture and Society

Some of the harms of the Internet that are mentioned frequently run directly contrary to their perceived benefits. Without denying that the internet provides new possibilities for information, communication, commerce, entertainment, and social interaction, critics tend

to argue that the quality of these activities is harmed when they are performed over the Internet. So there is a comparative harm: compared to traditional ways of performing these activities, the Internet offers us an inferior or less beneficial way of performing them. In addition, critics perceive a number of other negative consequences of Internet use, that concern human development, human experience and social organization.

1. *Information overload.* It has been claimed that the Internet contributes to information overload, by stimulating the consumption of information and exposing users to an abundance of often irrelevant, unclear and inaccurate messages and data fragments. This has been claimed, for individuals, to cause anxiety, poor decision-making, difficulties in memorizing and remembering, and reduced attention span, and, for organizations, to lead less efficiency and poorer decision-making (Edmunds and Morris, 2000).

2. *False information.* It has been claimed that, because of the absence of good selection mechanisms, the Internet contains much false and unreliable information. Moreover, it is often impossible to evaluate the correctness of information found on the Internet, as it is often difficult to credit or evaluate sources. Therefore, the Internet is thought to represent a step backwards compared to more traditional information media.

3. *Harmful information.* It has been claimed that, because of the absence of selection mechanisms and effective regulation, the Internet contains a lot of harmful information: extremist ideology, recipes for making bombs, extreme forms of pornography, libelous information, and so forth. Compared to other, more controlled information media, the Internet can therefore be thought to do more harm.

4. *Harmful communication.* It has been claimed that conversations and dialogues on the internet often contain disrespectful, hurtful and inflammatory speech, and that conversations are often trivial or vulgar. The Internet has also been claimed to facilitate unwanted communication and harassment. Compared to other forms of communication, the Internet can therefore be claimed to represent a step backwards.

5. *Harmful effects on social relations.* It has been claimed that online social relationships may indirectly hurt offline (face-to-face) social relationships, because people will take less time and make less effort to engage in face-to-face interaction. It has also been claimed that online social relationships tend to be less profound, valuable and durable than offline relationships, and that computer-mediated communication is less expressive and authentic than face-to-face communication (Dreyfus, 2001)

6. *Harmful effects on community and social organization.* It has been claimed that the emergence of virtual communities and organizations may hurt

existing "physical" communities and organizations because people will devote less time and energy to them, and that virtual communities and organizations are less profound, valuable and durable than "physical" ones (Winner, 1997; Borgmann, 2004).

7. *Harmful effects on production and commerce.* It has been argued that the easy distribution of digital information over the Internet will hurt commerce and the so-called culture industry (musicians, film makers, artists, etc.). It has also been claimed that the Internet, and digital media generally, negatively affect artistic production by rationalizing art and art production techniques. Another claim is that Internet commerce is vulnerable to theft, fraud and hacking.

8. *Harmful effects on identity formation and psychological development.* It has been claimed that the relative anonymity (or pseudonymity) by which actions can be performed in cyberspace can lead to antisocial behavior that is performed without retribution. Similarly, computer games enable violent and disrespectful behavior that is often left unpunished, and may even rewarded. The possibility of such consequenceless antisocial behaviors is held to harm psychological development (Dreyfus, 2001; McCormick, 2001). Also, the ready and availability of Internet pornography, that can be consumed relatively anonymously, has been claimed to promote a harmful form of disinhibition that harms personalities. More generally, Internet can lead to addiction (Young, 2004).

9. *Harmful effects on learning and cognitive development.* The Internet has been claimed to harm learning and cognitive development by offering an associationist rather than a discursive model of knowledge (i.e. hypertext and hypermedia rather than traditional types of texts), by disinhibiting autonomous knowledge production ("copy-paste mentality"), by limiting the attention span of cognitive subjects ("zap culture,") and by disinhibiting the critical appraisal of information (the absence of accountability for online information) (Dreyfus, 1999).

10. *Cultural fragmentation.* It has been claimed that the Internet promotes cultural fragmentation by stimulating the formation of virtual communities and groups organized around specialized interests, themes or cultural identities (Winner, 1997).

11. *Loss of the sense of reality.* It has been claimed that the Internet helps eradicate the distinction between reality and representation, and creates a constant confusion about this distinction, leading to insecurities, disagreements, and a loss of meaning (Baudrillard, 1995; Borgmann, 1999).

12. *Loss of privacy and private-public boundaries.* It has been argued that there

is little privacy on the Internet, and that it is difficult to maintain clear boundaries between public and private spaces on the Internet, with resulting insecurities about the privacy conditions under which users operate.