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ENGL 1010

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10 December 2017

Does social media create social isolation?

Social media has been around for awhile now, but it was not until 1977 that a social media site named Six Degrees allowed users to upload a profile and make friends with other users. The 21st century is where technology really began to change rapidly. Sites like Myspace and LinkedIn gained prominence in the early 2000s. YouTube came out in 2005, but it was not until 2006 where Facebook and Twitter both became available to users throughout the world. In the world we live in today there are a tremendous variety of social networking sites, that we use on a daily basis. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and other social media applications help bring people together, and are constantly used by people of all ages. With great advancements of social networking, also come great concerns. When it comes to the issue of social media, one question that concerns many is, does social media create social isolation, not just on a personal level but an intellectual level too?

Some argue the social media keeps us connected with each other and it helps us navigate the world without the need to socialize with others face to face. A supporter of this claim is Annalisa Rodriguez, in which her article “Social media doesn't mean social isolation.” includes research conducted by the Pew Research Center’s and American Life Project, which states that

“social isolation has not changed much since 1985”. In their findings, only 6% of the adult population are truly socially isolated nowadays. People who are already social butterflies in real life gravitate toward all media where they can be involved in social interaction, including social media. Rather than creating isolation, research has found that social networking sites have broader and more diverse social networks. Annalisa argues that social media does not replace face to face interaction, but it creates more interaction with new people, even if we don't know the people we are interacting with, social media can create a community and connect people around the world to events and issues.

Critics of this position counter argue claiming that while social media does keep us connected, but that social isolation is inevitable. They discuss that we tend to be “social animals” that need to feel like we belong, social pain to us is as real as physical pain. These critics claim that social media has become one's “security blanket” to avoid uncomfortable situations. Francis Collins a director of the National Institutes of Health, includes research conducted by the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, stating that individuals between the ages of 19 to 32, who are heavy social media users are two to three more likely to feel socially isolated than those who use little to no social media. Francis argues that there is a possibility that people who feel socially isolated look to social media to fill the void, as well as spending many hours on social media can make one feel isolated seeing others having fun. Randi Nelson in his article “Social Media Effects: It May Be Encouraging Social Isolation” presents a study by the University of Pittsburgh which also show that teens who heavily use social media are three times more likely to feel socially isolated. Randi makes the claim that social media does not cause social isolation, but its has the possibility of making isolation tendencies worse.

Still other assert a more complex position, with the growing reliance of social technology we are more inclined to become more isolated because if we do not learn how to be alone without social media it will only lead us to feeling more alone. Supporters in this position claim that we think that being connected will make us less alone, but the reality is that not learning how to be alone will only lead us to feeling more alone and both on a personal and intellectual level. Sherry Turkle, the Abby Rockefeller Mauze Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of technology effectively argues that “People want to be with each other, but also elsewhere.” She argues that we feel as if there is no one to listen to us in the world, so we set ourselves to be isolated with machines who we believe think as we do. Dr. Rebecca Harris, a psychology lecturer at the University of Bolton, in her article “The loneliness epidemic: We’re more connected than ever- but are we feeling more alone?”, shares research conducted by the Mental Health Foundation, which found that loneliness is linked to poor health mental health. Loneliness affects all ages “Studies have shown that between 20 and 80 percent of adolescents report feeling lonely often, which is compared to 40 to 50 percent in an elderly population”. This percentage of adolescents doesn’t just mean they are isolating themselves personally. They include that not opening yourself to different viewpoints can lead one to feeling isolated. AJ Agrawal in his article “Are Social Networks Causing Loneliness Among Teens?”, shares the example of Tumblr, a place where teens go to reinforce negative thoughts and feelings. Social media platforms like these push teens into only interacting with like-minded people.

After viewing the different positions on the topic of whether or not social media creates social isolation, I personally believe that it all depends on the person. I agree with Sherry Turkle

with her argument that people want to be with each other but at the same time elsewhere. We need to understand that we cannot be in multiple places at the same time. But it should not push us to disconnect ourselves from neither the virtual world nor reality. We simply cannot rely on machines to “care for us”, I believe that we need to learn how to be alone and not rely on social media for comfort. Letting social media lead you to social isolation personally or intellectually I believe is really up to you. We need to understand that not everything that is posted online is real or truthful. Seeing others having fun or whatever they want the world to see, should not make one feel isolated. I agree that social media keeps most of us connected, but I also agree with the fact that social media is not completely to blame for social isolation. Social media is just a piece of the bigger picture.

Overall, social isolation has not changed much since 1985, only 6% of the adult population is truly socially isolated nowadays. I do not believe that there will be a huge increase in the socially isolated population, but with no huge increase it is also something that will never fully disappear. We might think that we are not socially isolated, but the truth is that we might not isolate ourselves on a personal level but we might be isolating ourselves intellectually. Social media is constantly changing and will continue to advance as our society evolves. With social media constantly evolving it will continue to be associated as one of the many causes for social isolation. But for now we simply need to appreciate the life we have, because once you socially isolate yourself, it is a hard cycle to get yourself out of.

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