

Is Social Media a Good or Bad Thing?

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Over the past two decades, social media has risen to become a part of our daily lives, making it easier than ever to interact with others from around the globe. Twitter, Instagram, and other social-networking apps each foster millions of posts and texts a day, making communication near-instant. While it does seem to enhance the human experience at a face-value, a deeper dive reveals social media to be a double-edged sword. Social media has impacted society without a doubt, but some are divided as to whether the impact is positive or negative.

Supporters of social media argue for its advantages, such as connecting people from across the globe to each other. Using social messaging apps can allow friends to communicate with each other even when they are physically separated, allowing people to maintain their relationships over long distances. Beyond family and friends, social media's popularity and global outreach creates a diverse community of users, fostering an increase in people's knowledge of other cultures and overall acceptance of others. A 2022 survey of American teens conducted by the Pew Research Center corroborated this claim, with 58% of teens reporting that social media helped them feel more accepted and 80% of teens reporting that social media helped them feel more connected to their friends. Social media also contains a wealth of information that is easily accessible, with users being able to post videos and photos on the internet at their discretion. Supporters argue that this helps people see the world from their phone and expand their horizons.

However, opponents argue that social media's downsides far outweigh its benefits. For instance, social media has disproportionately affected teen mental health due to FOMO (the Fear of Missing Out). This occurs when teens and young adults see others having fun on an excursion or something similar and feel like their lives are less enjoyable, which leads to feelings of isolation or unhappiness, impacting their mental health. They argue that the release of dopamine and pleasure chemicals in the brain when scrolling can lead to users spending hours on a screen instead of being productive. Some studies have found that this time spent "doom-scrolling" can lead to depression symptoms and poor sleep quality. Additionally, the algorithms that social media companies use to predict user behavior can cause "echo chambers." Because these algorithms feed users what they appear to be engaged to, it often shows users only one side of the political spectrum, and over time, the user is exposed to extremely radical content as their views are echoed back onto them, leading to confirmation bias and political polarization.

Discussion Questions

1. Is social media's ability to connect people a major risk or a major reward?
2. Does social media foster a net improvement in information systems?
3. Who is responsible for making social media safe from political

polarization and misinformation? Is it the government, the social media company, or the users themselves?

4. Should teens be allowed to use social media? Why or why not?