

Rapid advances in technology have connected the world in a such a way as it has never been connected before. The Internet has contributed vast opportunities for instant communication and information access; critical information regarding medicine, education, acquisition of languages, and commerce are only a few of the many exchanges that are now possible.

The Internet has changed the world and the world is still adapting to it. Anyone with a computer and an Internet connection has millions of pages to explore in the virtual world. Whilst this has enlightened and improved the lives of most Internet users, the Internet also has its pitfalls, which we shall explore.

Internet Predators are one of the most dangerous aspects of the Internet. Sites such as MySpace and YouTube can be used for voyeuristic psychopaths to look for prey of any age or gender. There has been much publicity of late regarding the dangers of MySpace, an Internet site for teens to share their lives, thoughts and have a place of their own to communicate. Whilst the idea is innocent enough, there are no real restrictions to bar predators from joining and pretending to be another teen. Several incidents of kidnappings have been documented, having resulted from a MySpace teen user connecting with an older person. What's more, teens on MySpace innocently put up personal information such as their address and phone number, as well as the school they attend. It is very easy for a predator to pursue a potential victim in this manner. There are no safeguards other than the teen's discretion and parental monitoring of the teen's activities.

Identity Theft is yet another common activity not only with the Internet, but with the advent of ATMs, more sophisticated credit cards and processing technology and the ability to obtain another person's identity with relative ease if one is skilled at doing so.

The ease of shopping online has been combined with the very real risk of credit card fraud or identity theft. Security measures have been put into place however, making shopping online safer. Still, there is the risk if the shopping site is not reputable or secure.

Online Dating/Chat

Whilst chatting with others from diverse communities is always enlightening, there is no real way to know to whom you are really talking. In 'cyberspace' anyone can be anything, and the risk of divulging too much information is too high. This is especially true for young people, but it applies to adults as well who may be gullible or vulnerable.

The personal computer and the Internet has brought enormous benefits overall, but the down side is showing itself in Western society. People tend to spend more time at the computer and less time taking exercise, contributing to the growing obesity problem. This is especially true of households that own computers, televisions and video game players.

The entertainment industry has also suffered from the development of computer technology in the form of pirating. File sharing enables consumers to download music and visual media for free, and they can then 'burn' a CD or DVD and listen to their music for free. This is also true of the MP3 players and iPods. Whilst the idea was to charge for downloading through specialized website stores such as iTunes, the reality is that more MP3 users use the file sharing sites to download music at no charge. This practice has caused strain on the entertainment industry that claims it has lost millions of dollars in the U.S. due to piracy practices.

Computers and the Internet have created a huge technological dependency in the Western world. Everything from banks to government offices to airports use

computer technology now, and in the event of a failure it could mean disaster. This is why such institutions (as well as individuals) must be diligent about computer viruses and worms. Viruses and worms can be anything from inconvenient to catastrophic, depending upon how the program is designed to harm the system it targets and how rapidly it is likely to spread.

Many people complain of 'spam,' unsolicited email that offers everything from discount pharmaceuticals to pornography. The 'spam' problem is little more than an inconvenience, and is easily dealt with by filters and blockers.

Perhaps the most psychologically dangerous aspect of the Internet is the ease with which users of any age can access graphically violent images and pornography. This is especially true of some of the newer video websites that do not censor or restrict content other than an innocuous warning. The 24/7 access to anything imaginable on the Internet is likely to be the most socially damaging aspect, since the Internet has no boundaries or regulations in the Western world. Few countries censor their servers; it is therefore simple to find anything anywhere online.

All in all, the Internet and personal computing have enabled millions of people to conduct business and communicate with greater ease and efficiency, but the social downsides are not to be ignored. Chatting online and having real social skills are two very different things, and it is possible that social skills will decline as the Internet takes the place of person to person communication.

At the end of the day, users themselves are accountable for how they use the Internet, and parents are responsible for teaching their children to handle the Internet responsibly.