The Dangers of the Internet

Modern society depends on the technology of networked computing more than ever. Whether it is the Internet, the World Wide Web (WWW), or other less well-known networks, people around the world depend on it for multifarious reasons from work and entertainment to essentials of life such as life support in medicine. Networked computing offers easy access, a large degree of anonymity and while this presents us with unique opportunities, it also presents us with unique dangers. In light of the increasing use and even dependence on networked computing, it is pertinent to examine the social, physical and ethical dangers presented by it. This essay critically debates the issue of whether the world of networked computing is as dangerous as the physical world.
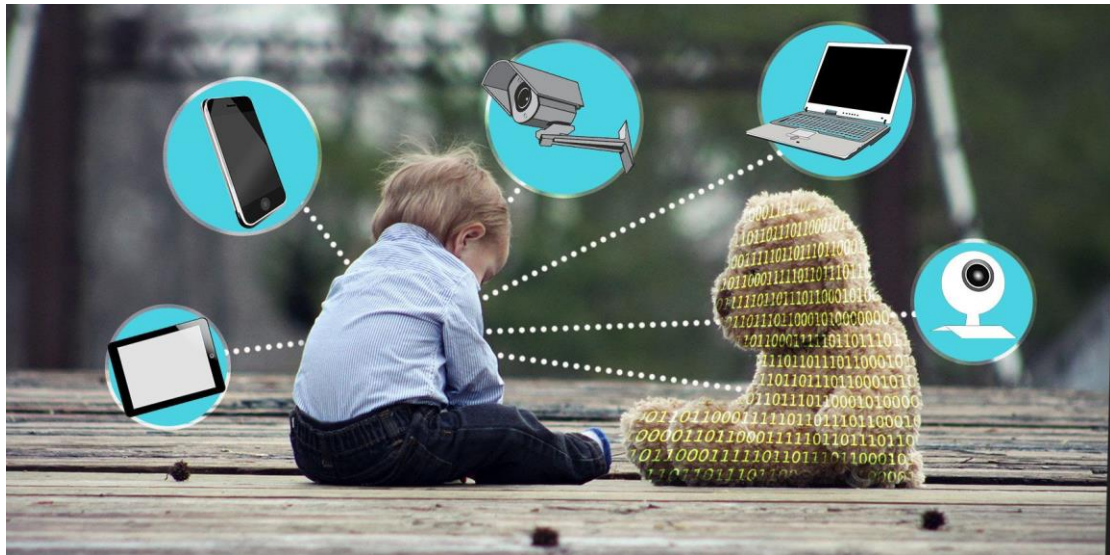
Bullying and Other Negative Electronic Relationships

The virtual world is home to some serious negative and destructive electronic relationships. Cyber bullying, one of the more common ones, is mainly targeted at school pupils in addition to actual physical and verbal bullying. Carnell (2007) points out to evidence that many pupils are being targeted in their own homes, by phone texts, silent calls, on instant messenger, and by abusive websites and forums, some set up with the specific intention of causing humiliation and embarrassment. This shows the severity of cyber bullying in society today.

Griffiths, M.D. (1998) offers the following explanation. The Internet is easy to access from home or work. It is becoming quite affordable and has always offered anonymity. For some people it offers an emotional and mental escape from real life, and this is especially true for individuals who are shy or feel trapped in unhappy relationships. It is also true for individuals who work long hours and have little opportunity for social life. Electronic (or internet) relationships started off when chatrooms were introduced and really boomed since the creation of Instant Messaging. A person can enter a chatroom, use an alias, and can talk to other members without revealing their true identity. However, this raises an important question. If you can do all that without revealing your true identity can you really trust the person you are talking to? Can you be certain that they are being honest with you? Some say that it's not real and therefore they don't really worry about it, while others suggest that Internet relationships have a way of tapping into deep feelings and it's easier to get hurt. Katz and Rice (2002, p286) suggest, "students are meeting and "dating" on the internet...they even have monogamous relationships this way, telling others who might ask that they will not go out with them because they are "dating" someone." Various researches suggest that it is more common for young people to meet and date people using the Internet and it is becoming more widely accepted as a social meeting point. This however causes concerns about why people are choosing to use the Internet for this reason. Many people feel more comfortable talking about feelings over instant messaging, and this is especially true of shy people or people that feel trapped in an offline relationship.

Addictions

The Internet also has the notoriety of helping to create unhealthy addictions. The majority of UK bookmakers now run online websites in which people can make exactly the same bets they would in the betting shop, but from the comfort of their own home. The rate at which the online gambling industry is commercialised today is astronomical. From 2005 to 2006 the sector has become the fifth largest advertiser online, jumping to 2.5 billion from 911 million ads in the last year (Schepp, 2002). And this is without the likes of TV ads, magazine ads, and adverts on the radio. This means that the majority of people in society now see online gambling as more acceptable than in recent years. Besides the increased risk of fraud on the Internet, the online gambling also poses the serious problem of an easier way to get addicted. This is because it is relatively easier to sit in front of a computer and gamble than to walk to the nearest betting shop in the cold winter to make a bet. Gambling is however, just one of the addictions people are vulnerable to online. Mitchell (2000) uses the term 'Internet addiction' to indicate the spectrum of additions that one is susceptible to on the Internet. He states that although there is some disagreement about whether Internet addiction is a real diagnosis, compulsive Internet use has psychological dangers, and reports such behaviour can result in the users having withdrawal symptoms, depression, social phobia, impulse control disorder, attention deficit disorder, etc.

Viruses and Hacking

In 2000, the number of worldwide email mailboxes was put at 505 million, and this was expected to increase to 1.2 billion in 2005 (Interactive Data Corporation, 2001). Schofield (2001) points out that more than 100 million people use instant messaging (IM) programs on the net, and a growing number among them also use it to transfer files. This number is obviously growing, but this example shows that online communication is becoming a much widely used method of communication. Online communication such as email and instant messaging does not come without problems. Hindocha (2003) states that instant messengers can transfer viruses and other malicious software as they provide the ability to transfer text as well as files. Viruses and malicious software can be transferred to the recipient's computer without the knowledge of the user. This makes them very dangerous. As the use of online communications becomes more widespread, it is seen as an opportunity for people to gain access to the files on a computer. Hindocha (2003) gives the example of hackers using instant messaging to gain unauthorised access to computers, bypassing desktop and perimeter firewall implementations. This is a real concern for most users, especially as the instant messaging and email client software are 'trusted' software; for a home user, their personal information stored on the computer, such as internet banking security details, identifying information that could be used in identity theft, etc. are the risks. However, online communication software such as these are also often used in businesses also, and in this case, extensive records of financial information are vulnerable. Hindocha (2003) goes on to say about instant messaging systems, "finding victims doesn't require scanning unknown IP addresses, but rather simply selecting from an updated directory of buddy lists." This throws up serious concerns.

Theft and Fraud

Electronic commerce faces the major threats of theft and fraud. Online theft commonly occurs in the form of identity theft, and less commonly, outright theft, for example by unauthorised access to bank accounts. Camp (2000) points out that while it may seem a big leap to exchange a bill of paper money for machine readable data streams, the value bound to the paper abstraction of wealth is simply a reflection of trust in the method of abstraction that is widely shared and built over centuries. Money on the Internet is simply a different abstraction of wealth, and has similar issues with trust and risk as traditional money, together with the additional dangers posed by the virtual nature of the environment. Because all communication on the Internet is vulnerable to unauthorised access, this means that it is relatively easy to commit fraud. Where legislation is not a deterrent, technology is almost none. Credit card fraud and theft, electronic banking theft, etc. are some of the more common crimes committed online involving money.