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**Plugged In**

The traditional and print-based world is being shaken to its core. As the digital age continues to take over, many communities and age groups are witnessing the effects of a world dependent on electronic devices. Of these age groups, the “millennial” generation is perhaps the most interconnected group in terms of digital media consumption. The concepts of media convergence and the Internet, have flourished into integral parts of society. For some, this is a burden, but for others, the world has only been improved. In fact, it is hard for many of those belonging to the younger generations to even imagine a world that wasn’t digitized. The exploration of the digital divide and its effects on differing age groups, nations, individuals, and their communities is crucial to establishing an understanding of the media convergence we are currently witnessing. Innovations such as smartphones, issues like data mining/ net neutrality, and cultures inspired by businesses of varying scales, all contribute to the digital world immersing its media predecessors.

As previously mentioned, the expansion of digital media had unique effects on several different age groups and cultures. The connection brought forth by the Internet and the digital devices that connect to it, can bring together many people. Perhaps the most positive element of the digital world would be that it is an open forum for people to converse no matter where they are in the world. For instance, grandparents can stay connected with their grandchildren from across the country. Before the digital age, this could only be accomplished through written letters, making phone calls, or planning in-person visits. However, these options are not the most reliable for consistent conversation. Especially, if a loved one is too sick to travel, unable to afford a long-distance call, or lacking the ability to write. The Internet provides families with the opportunity to connect no matter where they are. Facetime can give anyone the chance to talk face-to-face through the screen of their smartphone, computer, or tablet. Additionally, the use of instant messaging services and social media, has become a way for anyone to keep track of their friends and family from across the country, or even the world.

After all, social media’s influence is vast. Any individual can connect to people on an international scale simply by creating a free account on Facebook or Twitter. This convenient means of staying in contact, has provided many with the ability to keep up with friends and family at the push of a button. Despite this, social media is under fire from many different communities and age groups. Older generations, for instance, often see social media as a distraction from the outside world. Their claim is that the “millennial” generation is too dependent on social media for contact. The meaningful connections established by real life interaction, are overshadowed by the digital relationships and online reputations this generation seeks to maintain. For instance, even when a younger individual spends the night with friends, there is often a picture or post regarding the occasion. On top of that, it is not uncommon to see millennials checking their phones constantly while their friends and family are right beside them in person. These negative aspects of media convergence are critical, but they do not cover the extensively positive elements the Internet has provided communities with.

In fact, the Internet has become a hub for many individuals to find and connect with others of similar interests. Not only can this help bring new people into preexisting communities, but also, inspire the formation of new communities. After all, individuals take comfort in knowing that they are not alone in their interests and pursuits. Most notably, political parties and groups can come together to discuss views and build a following. The 2016 election, for example, relied heavily on the Internet to draw young voters to the polls. Candidates such as Bernie Sanders, used social media platforms like Twitter to stay connected to his constituents and appeal to the younger generation. Pages supporting candidates, such as Sanders, used memes and more to highlight the issues and capture the attention of young voters. The creation of the hashtag, #FeelTheBern, proved to be what *FastCompany.com* calls, “one of the most creative hashtags ever seen for a campaign” (Grothaus). Perhaps that is why Bernie Sanders suddenly proved to be such a worthy competitor for the “shoe-in” candidate, Hillary Clinton. His massive online following and dedicated community brought together voters from all over the United States. However, this powerful community and appeal is not limited to the political world.

A more light-hearted side of the Internet also exists. Communities can be created through Facebook groups and Tumblr tags. These communities, often called “fandoms,” are dependent upon their online group for content related to their area of interest. In the past, book clubs and conventions provided people with a way to communicate and connect with those of similar interests. The online world, however, has opened a new opportunity for these people to meet and discuss their passions. Discussion boards are often flooded with conversations about television premieres, fan art for beloved films, and alternative fictional stories pertaining to their topic of interest. (These stories are known as “fanfiction.”) In addition to discussion boards, real-life events are even organized. The popular augmented reality game, Pokémon GO, provides gamers with an opportunity to catch their favorite pocket monsters in “real life.” These players create events to meet with each other and play the game in groups. Some of these people were socially isolated prior to playing the game, so it is incredibly beneficial for them to be able to create meaningful relationships outside of the online world. As such, a counterpoint to the negative qualities of the digital age, could be that situations like this do, in fact, bring people together in the real world.

The innovation of the smartphone is also an incredibly positive aspect of media convergence. In its short lifetime, the Internet has moved from being accessible exclusively on bulky and stationary computer systems, to being literally held in the palm of a user’s hand. Not only can the Internet be accessed from these devices, however, but also plenty of mobile applications and other handheld software. In a short span of time, smartphones evolved from the simplicity of the first smartphone, 2002’s Blackberry, to the complexity and high-tech software incorporated into the first iPhone in 2007. According to *Media and Culture*, “by 2015, there were about 1.4 million apps available to do thousands of things on Apple devices” (Campbell et al 49). This incredible spread of mobile applications advanced rapidly in the devices’ 8 years of existence. That is truly remarkable when one considers how rapidly technology has grown recently. This is evidence of how technological advancements have flourished during the short years of the existence of digital media.

Additionally, such advancements are not merely limited to devices and their software. In fact, net neutrality has developed into an essential concept of equality and openness online. The text defines net neutrality as, “the principle that every website and every user -- whether a corporation or you- has the right to the same Internet network speed and access” (Campbell et al 62). This concept has come under attack from those trying to turn the Internet into a business. Fortunately, the FCC has taken legal action to secure the right to net neutrality for all -- at least for now, that is. There is a fear that cable and/ or television companies who offer Internet services are working against users and trying to harm net neutrality. Such power over users would prove to be dangerous, so it is crucial to fight for the protection of this concept. The Internet, after all, was built to be an open environment. Its creators would not approve of such sanctions against the “free web.” Issues with net neutrality could lead to an increase in the digital divide as well. The digital divide refers to the separation of those with digital access to information and those without. This immense divide essentially places those without Internet services, in what those with said services view as an entirely different world. Unlike this divide in digital access and the lingering fear of the collapse of net neutrality, however, there is another topic with both positive and negative traits.

The previously mentioned topic is data mining. Data mining is an online practice that businesses use to gather information on web users. Companies can essentially buy the rights to see what you “like” on Facebook, what you search for on Google, and even what you “double-tap” on Instagram. Once these companies know your interests, they will begin advertising things that cater towards your tastes. This frightening concept reveals an issue of privacy and concern for potential fraud. Several of these advertisements could be from fake companies, after all. It is very hard to distinguish who you are truly buying from when you click on a banner-ad on social media or Google. Such scams are not uncommon on the Internet, and they often lead to more problems in the future. A failed transaction could lead to anything from a phishing scam, to pure identity theft. Despite these potential issues, however, users do not seem bothered. In fact, it seems as if many users appreciate seeing advertisements that cater towards their interests. There is a certain level of convenience that online users have come to expect. That desire for convenience is blaringly present in a situation such as this.

There is also sense of trust that users hold for their favorite online companies. These companies are not only convenient as I’d mentioned before, but also widespread and largely accepted. As such, those browsing these sites online rely on these businesses for their needs. The trust users bolster for large-scale companies such as Amazon, Google, and even Netflix, overshadow their lesser-known competitors. Branding is everything in the digital age. Therefore, big businesses attract a lot of attention and nearly monopolize other businesses. For example, Amazon just recently bought Whole Foods. Despite Whole Foods not being a small company, it is deeply concerning that it was so easily dissolved into an online store like Amazon. There is a point where one might question the future of shopping versus online retail. Amazon presents a more affordable alternative to other means of shopping, and it is also more convenient for many people. As such, it is very attractive to shoppers in this digital age. Furthermore, Amazon’s deal with Whole Foods will lead to fresh produce being shipped out online. According to *Business Insider*, “Whole Foods Market's healthy and high-quality private label products — including 365 Everyday Value, Whole Foods Market, Whole Paws and Whole Catch — will be available through Amazon.com, AmazonFresh, Prime Pantry and Prime Now” (Lutz). Such options might be problematic for both online food markets of much smaller scales, and family-owned grocery stores nationwide. Advancements of this technological time clearly come at a price. It is ultimately the decision of the consumer as to whether or not this media convergence is good or bad.

All in all, digital media and the Internet are impacting the world rapidly. Advancements in technology have proven to form a new digital age with both positive and negative qualities. These qualities include bringing together communities and reuniting families, while simultaneously creating an unhealthy dependence on devices and the Internet. Furthermore, the concepts of net neutrality, smartphones, data mining, and the current business divide, prove to hold immense importance to the users they impact every day. The world is rapidly evolving to match the ever-growing influence of this digitally based information age. Society must “plug in” just to keep up.

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