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Protecting Our Youth in an Online World

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Merrimack College Honors Program

Honors Capstone Paper

December 2021

Protecting Our Youth in an Online World

Young people can be extremely impressionable and impulsive. Their brains are not fully developed yet, so they are learning about life from the things they see, the encounters they have, and the things they are taught by adults or peers. They are still forming their personalities and deciding for themselves what is right and wrong. In our current society filled with social media, the children of our generation become blind followers to the people and images they see every day. The spectrum of content is large and unfortunately, our youth have access to it all, including the bad. These images can show anything from fashion, to cooking, to illegal drug use. It seems as though social media has started controlling our society. Social media can control what people buy and tell people what the new trends are, but they can also control how people act. Sometimes people are exposed to positive images of people doing good deeds while other times it can glorify negative influences such as drugs or crime. If a child sees a post on social media, for example, that shows someone vandalizing a building, they are going to be more likely to go out and try doing the same thing. Young people want to be just like the people they see on their favorite apps, so they copy their behavior. Although these social media sites can preach good ideas and messages, oftentimes it is the negative and harsh images that have the greatest impact. Continued exposure to the media and some of these violent images, can eventually lead younger people down a path of crime and deviance.

Technology and media have quickly taken over our society. Everything we do today seems to relate to the media somehow, and whether people like to admit it or not, the media can control a lot of the things we do. With youth so easily influenced, our society needs to start examining what some of the negatives of a media filled society can mean for the generations that are going to come after us. Growing up during such a time of technology is a blessing, but also a

course. Younger generations have access to information that our older generations could have never dreamed of, but some of this information can be damaging to a brain not fully developed. Seeing the same violent images and messages every day can begin to live in the minds of adolescents and eventually lead to them acting in similar risky behaviors. The social media sites have become more strict in recent years as to what they want and do not want posted on their sites. Their community guidelines have become more strict and more defined in order to protect not only the company itself but also the younger populations that have started using their apps. These policies and regulations are aimed at preventing sensitive content from being shown to everyone on their sites. Different sites go about this content censoring in different ways. Some sites censor the content themselves while others give users the option of controlling their own content.

Social media is only becoming more popular, so it is important that we understand its effects on youth sooner rather than later. If there is a way that we can encourage the media to make a more positive impact on our youth, we need to act quickly before too much damage is done. If we do not study its impact now, then we are leaving our society in the hands of a generation that has been exposed to violence and crime at an extremely young age.

Literature review

Advertising and Visual Encouragement

Social media encourages people to engage in a variety of different activities every single day. Companies have been able to use the impact of social media to their advantage when it comes to promoting new products or their companies in general. When looking at influencer's platforms, companies look at specific demographics in order to understand what type of audiences they have and how they can play off of that general population's interests (Argyris,

2020). Social media has already begun impacting aspects of our everyday lives and people have begun viewing social media “influencers” much like they would other celebrities. Their opinions of these people have become so important that they are willing to trust them enough when they tell them what types of clothes they buy, and they are likely to trust them in other aspects of life as well. If people are seeing their favorite famous figures participating in certain illegal activities they may begin to see it as cool or acceptable to do as well. People are constantly looking for ways to fit in with certain groups and by following mainstream celebrities and influencers, many of them believe they are accomplishing this.

People have always been drawn to certain things because of the way they are advertised and presented. Visuals, such as social media posts, album covers, and music videos, are all outlets that use imagery when trying to convince viewers to feel a certain way or in some circumstances to do something (Pinkney, 2018). These visuals are not always showing legal or safe activities, and sometimes they can even be glorifying activities that involve violence and crime. The images being shown look cool because of the graphics and the people doing them, but they do not always have the best intentions or messages behind them. Images of guns, for example, are very popular online. When looking at images and posts about guns, it is easy to see that these are things that people are interested in. Throughout history, violent images have always been in the media but this time they are more accessible than ever before (Patton, 2019). People are seeing these influencers and images on their feeds every single day and being exposed so frequently that this may cause people to think that certain activities are normal or socially acceptable, when in reality they are not.

Feeling Included

Social media makes people feel validated and connected to their peers. When asked about social media use, many college aged students told researchers that they were on social media in order to feel a sense of belonging and also to get the validation that comes with posting and staying connected with people online (Bharucha, 2018). A lot of people, especially the younger generations, look for validation through things such as likes and follows. It is less about the content itself, but more of the feeling they get from everything they post. Sometimes on social media, it is the violent images that are given the most attention, so other people may also start turning their content towards a more violent and graphic nature in order to get more attention and to get a bigger reaction from their followers. Gang members have begun using social media to reach larger audiences in order to choose who they want to join their group (Pinkney, 2018). Social media has made it very easy for people to connect with large groups of people. Unfortunately, these are not always the best types of groups to be a part of and they can encourage their members to engage in activities they might not otherwise have done.

An important argument against social media is that people have become so numb to the things they are seeing on social media every day, that they have a harder time being able to tell the difference between reality and online. When asked if students would choose to interfere if they saw a student showing warning signs on their media pages, most students said they would step in and seek help in some way (Gritton, 2017). A big problem with that, however, is that many kids are not completely serious online. It is very easy to hit the post and send button without truly accepting the consequences that come with it . This can make things difficult when deciding what is serious and what is simply a way to get social media attention. People have begun contacting more online than in real life. Online interactions are very different from in

person interactions and sometimes it can be hard to differentiate what is the truth and what is simply a social media stunt. Younger people who might not know what is true and what is not, might have a harder time making smart decisions.

Devious Activity Portrayed on Social Media

Violent images are portrayed in our media every day and they have been for hundreds of years. Whether it was public executions or violent video games, people have always had access to disturbing images. The only difference between now and then is how this type of media is accessed. Today we have access to any information we want in the matter of seconds and we can view these images from the comforts of our own homes (Short, 2015). The question becomes: how will a person's brain react to being shown the same types of images every day? After time, seeing violent images becomes a normal everyday thing for some people. There is a certain feeling of numbness that begins to form where people are no longer shocked by what they are seeing (American Psychological Association, 2013). They may even start to think they are being encouraged to engage in similar, sometimes violent activities. A lot of our media today focuses on the shock factor when it comes to drawing in audiences. People are more likely to watch the news when it is shocking and at times violent because it easily catches attention (Intravia, 2017). These violent images instill fear in the communities and give people the sense that certain areas are filled with more violent crimes than others. They are seeing these violent images and thinking it is the reality everywhere, when in actuality it is happening very rarely.

Social media does not discriminate when it comes to who is allowed to post and who has a platform. These sites have every type of person including criminals. Criminals are now given a platform where they can encourage others to be like them. They paint themselves in a certain way on their pages to seem cool and interesting in order to gain attention or support (Patton,

2019). With access to real life criminals, people might start looking up to them much like they look up to other famous influencers. People in the past, typically became famous by doing something noteworthy. In today's generation, however, the people who are becoming famous on social media are becoming popular based more on luck than actual merit. They are not doing anything really special, yet they are gaining large followings. This means that young people are looking up to very typical citizens who may or may not actually deserve the platform they have been given. People are drawn to figures with different types of stories and life experiences, and to some people criminals might seem really interesting and worth getting to know. With the platform they have, criminals have access to a large number of people where they could potentially encourage others to participate in activities similar to the illegal ones that they have previously done.

Shifts in Policies & Regulations

When it comes to the social media sites themselves, there are certain policies and regulations that have been created in order to try to prevent these sensitive images or videos from coming up on people's feeds. These sites acknowledge that there is a wide range of people using their apps and not everyone wants to be exposed to the same types of images. Instagram has recently created a setting that allows people to have control over the amount of sensitive content they want to be exposed to on the app. The default setting for Instagram is to limit sensitive content, but by going into the settings you can personalize your account to show various levels of sensitivity. You can completely shut the sensitivity off if you would like in order to be exposed to any of the wide range of images being posted on the app (Hunter, 2021). The debate with this new control becomes, whether or not this is enough to keep people safe from exposure to more graphic images. Instagram is defining what is "sensitive" and what is not. We have the control to

change the level of sensitivity, but there is still a chance for younger audiences especially to be exposed to graphic or violent images.

Other social media sites do not give their users as much choice in the amount of sensitive imagery they are exposed to. Instead, the sites themselves decide what does and does not follow their community guidelines. Tiktok, for example, promises to remove any content they feel does not follow their guidelines. They also give users the option to report certain videos for being inappropriate (TikTok, 2020). The issue with this system is that there is still a lot of opportunity for viewers to be exposed to violent or sensitive content. These videos are often not reported in time meaning the millions of people with the app all have the opportunity to see this content before it is officially removed. For younger users especially, this can be concerning. They still do not know what is and is not appropriate and on apps like Tiktok, exposure and interaction with content like this can actually increase the amount of similar content in the future. These apps show viewers the content they believe they will be interested in and it is essentially impossible to ensure that the content they are suggesting is always appropriate for specific viewers. These apps try to reassure their users that they will protect them from exposure to sensitive content, however, this is something almost impossible to control completely with the millions of people posting content every second.

Recent Legislation

When it comes to regulating social media content there are several new additions that have been made to legislation that are designed to protect younger audiences. In 1996, Congress enacted the Communications Decency Act which was designed to prevent minors from gaining access to sexually explicit materials on the Internet. The Act potentially includes any individual that provides content to a viewer without verifying their age first and also potentially requires

commercial and noncommercial content to go through screening procedure in order to avoid criminal prosecution. The penalties for violating this act include fines, imprisonment, or both. In the case of the Communications Decency Act, although it is designed to protect against sexually explicit content, it could also apply to violent and criminal content as well (Zeigler, 2009). Many times, information is exchanged between viewers without verifying the ages of the viewers that are being given the content. That is a huge problem that happens on the internet daily. It is easy to pretend to be older online. This Act is designed to protect the people that are underage by requiring people to do more research on the people they are sharing content with. Explicit content should not just be shared with everyone and anyone. We need to make sure we are doing all that we can to make sure that harmful content is not being handed to younger people.

A major worry when the internet started and one that continues today, is how we can protect our children from seeing explicit or harmful content online. As technology advances, it becomes harder and harder for parents to monitor the content that their children are exposed to every single day. The Children's Internet Protection Act that was enacted by Congress in 2000 was designed to fix this problem and to help protect children from exposure to negative content. The Act mainly applies to schools and libraries as it ensures that there are certain images, pages, videos, etc that are blocked completely from their system. Schools and libraries are often the first interactions children have with internet access and use. The Act tells these places to block or filter internet access to photos that are obscene, child pornography, or other images that could be potentially harmful to minors (Federal Communications Commission, 2020). Blocking these pages and content completely stops the possibility of bad content being exposed to these vulnerable groups. Although school today only represents a small amount of time where a child is exposed to the internet, it is still a positive step forward to have all harmful content removed

from their computers. Children get used to a more clean version of the internet and they become steered away from looking up bad things. These limitations also prevent bad content from slipping through the cracks and accidentally being shown to these children. All negative content is blocked so there is no room for any inappropriate images being shared to the children. If a larger scale program like this was introduced to places outside of school as well, there would likely be a lot of conflict about whether or not limiting the internet like this would be legal. The idea behind it, however, is definitely beneficial and should be considered in order to protect our youth. The internet is only going to become more dangerous as time goes by and more content is shared. We need to stay on top of limiting content for younger generations before their exposure becomes harmful.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, social media and internet use was at an all time high especially for younger people. With no school or work, a lot of people turned to social media as a source of entertainment. Spending hours online can sometimes lead viewers down a slippery slope of content that they might not have originally sought out. In order to protect children better online, Senators Markey and Cassidy proposed a bipartisan bill in order to update some of the guidelines for children's privacy online. This bill is designed to stop internet companies from collecting personal information for users ages thirteen to fifteen without their consent (Ed Markey: United States Senator for Massachusetts, 2021). As young teens spend more time on social media and online, companies begin collecting data on the things that interest them and begin recommending content related to that to them. While this is a good idea for people who want to be recommended more content that they like, it can be harmful for young people. Young people are still trying to find their footing online and might be recommended content that is too mature and harmful for them. If they do not have a say in companies recommending content to

them, they have no say in what type of content that is going to be either. Children can be very easily targeted by these larger companies because they still do not know how to keep themselves safe on the internet. This bill will stop companies from preying on these younger viewers for things like ads or content recommendations.

The Effects of Parents and Schools

Since the age range of social media users continues to get younger and younger, the responsibility to keep children safe online can fall to parents and schools. These are the people and institutions children are seeing and interacting with every day, so they can be helpful when it comes to encouraging students to practice safe online habits. For parents, there are many helpful online resources available with helpful ways for parents to get involved and helpful language to use with them when trying to address online safety. The Department of Justice (2021) website offers a number of ways parents can promote safe online habits for their children. They encourage parents to tell their children to avoid putting personal information on the internet, talk about the benefits of an online safety plan, and encourage reviewing apps before the children are able to use them (The United States Department of Justice, 2021). Another site for the NYC Department of Education encourages parents to keep technology easily accessible in order to prevent secret use, to regularly monitor what their children are using their technology for, and implement some level of parental controls. Parental controls on technology can help prevent screen time for children or can even completely block certain apps or websites from being used. The site acknowledges, however, that there is going to be some inappropriate content that their children might be exposed to even with parental controls. There is only so much parental controls can do, so that is why it is so important for parents to have more open conversations with their children about the importance of staying safe online. If something inappropriate was to

come up during their online time, it is important for them to have a trusted adult to go to (NYC Department of Education, 2021). Although parenting and government sites like these can offer parents helpful advice and information on internet safety, technology and social media is constantly changing and it can be harder for older generations to understand the new sites that are popping up every five seconds. Parents should get themselves as familiar as they can with the technology that they are allowing their children to use in order to keep them as safe as possible. Adding parental controls can definitely be a helpful first step in keeping their children protected from some of the more violent and inappropriate sides of social media.

Aside from home, school is the place where children find themselves spending the most time during the important developmental stages of their lives. It is the job of the school to keep the children safe as they grow up and learn. As technology advances and becomes more prevalent in schools, schools must adjust their rules and find ways to monitor the online activity of their students. Boston Public School is one of the schools that gives their students access to technology every day when they come to school. Children are allowed to use computers throughout the day to work on classwork. “As required in the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA), BPS is required to protect students from online threats, block access to inappropriate content, and monitor Internet use by minors on school networks” (Boston Public Schools, 2002). If schools are going to give children access to technology, they need to make sure they are not exposing them to images that could potentially harm them. Boston Public Schools has a policy that requires them to block certain sites or images in order to keep their students safe. Many schools around the country follow similar policies and require certain things to be blocked. Children are curious about things and if they are given access to technology with free rein to look up anything they wish, they could be exposed to things that could be damaging to their

development. There are some things children aren't meant to see and schools can help protect them.

Critical Analysis

As with many new technologies and inventions, it takes people and communities a while to adjust. They need to consider new potential dangers and evaluate any laws or policies that might need to be changed. Today, we live in a world filled with new technologies. As we move forward, it is our job to make sure legislation is keeping up with the new ideas that come up. As society evolves, or laws need to evolve to protect us, especially our youth.

In our society, we definitely prioritize the safety and well being of our children. We want to protect them from danger and create laws that will shield them from any potential dangers. Although media and technology can be fun and helpful for people to use, we must also be wary of the dangers that come with it. The internet and social media opens up intense access to information that not everyone should be exposed to at an early age. Access to information can be helpful when trying to learn about something, however, not all information online is user friendly. The Internet allows people to share information with each other. Unfortunately, this also allows for people to connect by sharing violent or graphic images with one another as well. These images and explicit content is shared quickly and can reach a large audience. Children have the ability to intercept these types of information if not monitored. This content can be harmful for developing individuals and might give them the wrong impression of what is right and wrong.

There are a lot of things we have already tried to do when it comes to keeping children safe online. New legislation ensures children will be safe online by enforcing restrictions that should prevent children from being exposed to the negatives of media. The Communications

Decency Act and the Children's Internet Protection Act are just two examples of legislation that have been passed recently to keep minors safe online. As time goes on, legislation like this will likely continue to be passed as we dive deeper into the technological world. It will be the job of politicians to make sure that children's safety continues to be prioritized in the future.

The Communications Decency Act of 1996 was constituted by Congress in order to prevent minors from gaining access to sexually explicit materials on the Internet. Violating the provisions of this Act can include fines or imprisonment (Zeigler, 2009). While this Act is beneficial when it comes to protecting minors from predators and sexually graphic images, it does not necessarily cover criminal or violent images. They are protecting minors from one danger but ignoring a lot of other dangers. A lot of new technology has been created and invented since 1996, so this is definitely a starting point to legislation about Internet safety. There is also a lot of trust being placed on the fact that people would be deterred to share sexually explicit content in order to avoid possible jail time. This, however, will not deter everyone. People will always find ways to not get caught online. This is why we need to work ahead of social media sites and technology to make sure that we are not behind when crimes like these occur online. There is still much to be done in regards to the content that should not be allowed to be posted on social media.

The Children's Internet Protection Act was enacted by Congress in 2000 in order to require schools and libraries to have Internet Safety policies. If schools and libraries do not have Internet Safety policies they risk losing their discounts for their Internet access (Federal Communications Commission, 2020). This act is very beneficial as children spend more of their time at school. We need to make sure that all schools are well equipped on how to keep their children safe. The problem with an Act like this is that there is no set policy that all schools are

required to follow. It is up to the school to create their own Internet safety policy. Some schools might have more internet security than others which means children are being exposed to different levels of media across the country to a certain degree. What might be blocked on one school might not be at another. In order to create a more secure environment for children online, we need to make sure we are all on the same page and create a universal policy everywhere.

Unfortunately there are only very few legal policies like this that have been created to keep children safe online. Our society has put a lot of trust into the schools and homes that our children are spending most of their time at to teach them the importance of being safe online. These can only do so much. There are laws that prevent people from posting certain content. These laws, however, only punish the people responsible after the fact. We need to create more legislation like this in order to keep children safe before they are exposed.

With further research and studies, I believe there will be a connection between youth exposure to violent or criminal images online and their future criminal activity. I think that a more personalized approach to data collection could be very beneficial for a study like this. If a group of children were studied throughout their life, we could look at their social media use and what types of images they are exposed to on a day to day basis. From there, we can see how this media might affect how they mature and grow throughout their lives. This data collection would definitely be time consuming, but I think a research or focus group for a topic like this could be very beneficial and the results could more clearly show just how the media can affect youth. Media has incredible influence over the people in our society, especially youth. These images teach them that crime is acceptable or “cool” to a certain degree. Children learn from the things they see and hear growing up. With technology, children are not just studying the behaviors they

see at home and at school, they are also studying the things they see online as well. These online interactions are not always truthful or beneficial for young people to see.

Real World Applications and Recommendations for the Future

Today we live in a society filled with media. Almost everyone on planet Earth has access to social media in some capacity. The more social media that exists, the easier it is for these younger generations to have access to it. We are giving people without fully developed brains access to large amounts of data and images that no other generation has ever been exposed to that young. A lot of consequences of this have not yet been discovered because these generations are still relatively young. We cannot wait, however, to study these effects. We do not want it to be too late. Social media has a lot of great benefits, but with those benefits comes some negatives as well.

Previous research has been able to show the strong effects of social media on our culture today and I believe that this influence is stronger than just encouraging an audience to do something like buy a particular product. People go as far as to try to look exactly like their favorite creators, so it is not far-fetched that they would also want to mimic their actions as well. Children want to feel included and if social media is showing them that these actions are acceptable, they are going to attempt them as well. Young people still do not truly know how to tell the difference between right and wrong. They simply don't know any better.

We must work together in order to discover safer ways to use social media especially for youth. Technology is only going to get more and more advanced which means access to technology at younger ages and an even greater amount of information. It starts with the social media sites themselves. These sites need to make sure that they are creating a safe environment for all potential users. They need to ensure that the more graphic, criminal images are blocked

from users who should not be seeing things like that. Adding more censor options on their sites could be very beneficial. They can encourage everyone to use their apps if they find ways to protect their users. Legally, there are regulations that we can make to ensure that social media sites are following rules surrounding censoring and safety. Currently, there are several policies that have been created in order to promote protection online. The social media sites themselves need to make sure they are following these laws in order to continue to run their sites. These laws and regulations for media are going to be the things that really save the young generations. There is definitely more to be done for laws regarding internet safety as these are going to be the things holding responsibility for what can be found on their sites. We need to continue to update and create policies that will promote a safe environment online.

Parents and schools also need to make sure they are staying on top of the newest technology trends in order to keep students and children safe. There are new ways for media to be censored and monitored, so these functions need to be encouraged and used more often. Internet use needs to be an encouraged topic of conversation in order to make sure media is being used correctly and safely. Now that we are aware of the potential dangers of media, we need to be proactive in how we teach our children how to use media. Internet access often starts in the home, so this is where the foundation of safety can be taught.

If media is truly driving children to engage in more criminal activity, then we could have a serious problem on our hands. Media is only going to get more intense. Children are going to continue to be encouraged to engage in crime on social media as time goes on. If we do not do something to stop this problem soon and teach our children how to use the Internet safely, the crime rate could actually increase. People are going to think certain glorified images and messages of crime and violence are acceptable. I believe that there is still a chance to save our

youth. We need to be more conscious of our own media and what is being shown to younger viewers. If we get on top of censoring media better, we have the opportunity to keep younger viewers safe.

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