



These are complex times. Young people are using technology at a very early age. The planet is warming up. There are too many available guns in American society. What about A. I. and the oceans? We need to look at the pros and cons.

Nature vs. Technology - Who's Winning?

By D. J. Mathews

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NATURE VS. TECHNOLOGY — WHO'S WINNING?



D. J. MATHEWS

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Chapter One:

The Internet: Important Tool Or the Bane of Our Existence?

In a 1999 interview reported in the *Washington Post*, former Vice President Al Gore, running for president in 2000, said that he “created” the internet. That was an exaggeration, because he was not (publicly at least) a computer nerd, but someone who supported the U. S. Department of Defense’s effort to expand the internet and its uses. (A stakeholder and enthusiast, if you will.)

Actually, in 1969 the U. S. Defense Department started to make the internet available, by putting it on the Department’s online network. Working with the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPAnet) for a more secure way of communication, the Department needed the expertise of internet pioneer Vinton Cerf. Cerf actually had the assistance of Robert Kahn to create the procedures and protocol that would make the internet the formidable communication and knowledge spreading tool it would become. The National Science Foundation helped with a number of education and research connections. By 1989, it was spreading to common use for others, with the invention of the WorldWideWeb.

But Brit Sir Tim Berners- Lee, a computer scientist, is credited with inventing the World Wide Web itself. It was while working at CERN in Switzerland and researching “hypertext” that he created the World Wide Web, made available to all for free.

The internet, depending on one’s point of view, has been the great uniter of people from far away. Or the great divider. A way for relatives and friends to stay in touch, or another method of communication that just creates arguments. Great encyclopedic-supported knowledge? Or crazy health, political, historical, or personal claims?

It depends on where you look.

This technological wonder, with a computer, DSL connection, and the like, allows you to put down your heartfelt thoughts (such as on Facebook and Twitter posts, a personal blog or vlog). Facebook has certainly had an influence on many people.

Facebook

Facebook is the “picture” site that has become so much more. Started by Mark Zuckerberg in 2003 (the name being changed from FaceMash to Facebook in 2004), it has surpassed the older “My Space” in use and popularity. People can post pictures of a trip, comment on a national issue, post silly cat videos, or even their own drawings.

Some have questioned whether putting all your personal information out in this virtual Wild West that is the internet is safe or appropriate. Little kids and where they can be found could be accessed by those online seeking to possibly kidnap them.

And when principals (at least in this writer’s region) sought to hand out iPad tablets to middle school age children, did they realize there could be negative consequences to this new freedom? Many have learned to bypass adult safety protocols, to get on Facebook and other noneducational sites.

Cyberbullying, which involves harassment of students over the internet through various social media outlets, can cause students experiencing it to resort to drastic measures. These measures include refusing to go back to school, wanting education at home, and in some cases, committing suicide the trauma is so great. Sites like cyberbully.org have found that girls are as likely as boys to be bullied over the internet. Adolescents are quite impressionable and what is said online can lead to anger, frustration, low self-esteem, and thoughts of self-harm. This bullying can lead to behavior problems at school and even substance abuse.

This is such an issue that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does a biennial survey on the issue of bullied students; since 2011 it has also researched electronic or cyberbullying. They use a Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System for this. (These interesting surveys also monitor other behaviors like sexual activity, tobacco and vaping products use, and unstable housing conditions.)

In 2017, 15.5 percent of the students surveyed said they were cyberbullied; in 2013 it was 14.8 percent. Back in 2011 it was 16.2 percent of those surveyed; by 2019 (the last time data was available), it was 15.7 percent, so it is difficult to tell if it is increasing or decreasing substantially.

A few horror stories that parents have related, have out brought the issue of social media magnifying what bullying is already done in person at school. Ashlynn Conner was only ten when she took her own life. Why? At school they called her unkind names, like “ugly,” and “fat,” and also “slut,” though the last word they probably didn’t know the meaning of. She wanted to be homeschooled, but her mother refused. Social media use at home continued the verbal and mental abuse. She was found hanged in a home closet.

Kenneth Weishuln was 14 and had friends. Then he came out as gay and was bullied, even tormented by his old friends. He was harassed online and at school. He stopped it by committing suicide.

Social media can also cause harm to youth if a teen chats up a stranger online and offers to meet him, then is kidnapped. There are different dating type sites or apps (applications), from Eharmony to OkCupid. But when a young teen uses them, it can prove deadly.

One of the worse cases of dating apps proving deadly was the case of 13-year-old Virginian Nicole Lovell. Lovell had to have a liver transplant as a baby, and in doing so needed steroids to stay better, making her seem a bit overweight. She had a scar on her neck her peers made fun out and was miserable at school. Her parents watched her

closely at home, but didn't realize she was totally unsupervised online. On her smartphone, she got this Kik dating app that allowed you to be anonymous. Through the app she met Virginia Tech athlete David Eisenhauer; she was lonely and communicated with him online for many hours. Eventually they met.

News reports later brought out that he had taken her to a party and had alcohol or used some other drug. He didn't remember what happened; Nicole informed him she might be pregnant. He was an 18 year old engineering student and the news shocked him. So he invited her to sneak out of her home one evening in 2016 for a "secret date" which turned deadly. He took her to a deserted road and stabbed her 14 times. In 2018 he was sentenced to 50 years in prison. Two young lives ruined by an online dating app. Sometimes dating sites can also lead to catfishing, defined as someone pretending to be somebody else. Many times this leads to the other person at the site being bilked out of thousands of dollars because the first person says he (usually he) desperately needs money. Be aware on these dating sites, and don't tell everything about yourself, like your home address and how much money you have in the bank.

There have some good uses for social interaction, of course. During the Covid-19, coronavirus pandemic, schools, churches, and businesses held classes online over the Zoom video conference service. And during the "Arab Spring" (from December 2010-2012) citizens in countries such as Yemen, Egypt, Syria, and more demonstrated for more rights and recorded it online for all to see. Many living in countries with oppressive regimes have found ways to connect with those in democracies through social media on the internet, giving them hope for a better life elsewhere, encouraging them to dream or take direct action to make it happen. You can have a better life elsewhere when you connect with others on this world wide web of possibilities, **if** you are careful.

But sometimes communication online can turn toward deadly deeds. The American Congress has recently listened to testimony

gathered by the January 6th Commission about the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U. S. Capitol building. Damning testimony has shown citizens listened to former President Donald Trump’s advice to “march on the capitol” and protest election results, even though Joe Biden won the presidency fair and square, with more popular and electoral votes than Trump – there was no proof of widespread fraud to overturn the results.

Trump’s December 19, 2020 tweet on Twitter/X to meet in D. C. January 6th, and be there because it “will be wild,” encouraged thousands to show up. Thousands have since been arrested for literally breaking into the Capitol or trespassing, and threatening those who were verifying electoral count results to certify Biden as the next president. Several policemen died in this assault. It was not a good day for American democracy. Many online groups supporting that day have since been investigated for their part in inciting this violent protest. Some believe this has given a black eye to America’s image in the world.

So, the internet has many pros and cons. Do we keep this mechanism for great communication and knowledge? Perhaps some laws regulating political incitement, dating apps, and racist speech are in order. When it comes to the nature vs. technology argument, some negative aspects of the internet are winning. But people are looking more at regulation, so neither side wins this one.

About the Author

Ms. D. J. Mathews has been a freelance writer, adjunct professor, and Master naturalist member, the last for the New River Valley Chapter in Virginia. She has written for such publications as the *Virginia Journal of Education*, *The Roanoke Times*, *Bristol Herald Courier*, and *Appalachian Trailway News*. Her past books include *Let's Run Our Schools Together* and the YA book *Great American Women in Science and Environment*. See more of her writing at www.writerdjmathews.com/blog/ and <https://medium.com/@djmathews>. She is also on Facebook and LinkedIn.com, and <https://ko-fi.com/dj50772> . She is married and hails from Virginia.



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