

Lesson 5: The Internet and Social Media

The internet has revolutionized the way information is shared and consumed. The consequences have been both positive and negative, bringing forth a new set of challenges for the world.

First developed in the early 1960s, the internet eventually became mainstream in the mid-1990s. Google launched in 1998. Friendster, the first widely adopted social network, began in 2002, paving the way for more sites to come: MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat and countless others.

The introduction of the internet and the rise of social media has been significant for news and information.

Where traditional news organizations were once the gatekeepers of information and the only ones with the resources to disseminate it — printing presses and TV stations are costly to purchase and operate — now anyone, anywhere could be a publisher.

This was widely viewed as the democratization of information, a development that could bring new voices into public discourse and offer tools that could lead to positive social change. For example, in 2010, the Arab Spring showed hope for new technologies to organize citizens into social movements to topple repressive regimes. Unfortunately, it did not last, partly because the other side learned to use the tools as well.

The transition to the internet as a primary news distribution channel has also changed the gatekeeper of information from humans to machines.

When news came only from or traditional or legacy media — newspapers, TV, and radio — there was always a human who stood between audiences and information, a person or process that filtered the stories or content, checked facts and packaged stories for public consumption.

On social media, algorithms (computer calculations) now sort through the content to decide what to show you based on your preferences. Algorithms prioritize posts that are popular, regardless of whether or not they are credible. The information posted on social media is designed to make people want to read or view it, and share it — meaning it targets your emotions or aims to elicit a response (e.g., happiness, anger).

Social media platforms are free because they make money by growing engagement — increasing the number of users, holding our attention, and selling access to our attention to advertisers. It's the same model pioneered by newspapers 200 years ago, but it is more complex in a technological environment. The difference is that the advertising is targeted, based on who you are and your preferences, increasing the likelihood that the ads will be successful. People leave more data behind than they realize, through every action they take on a site.

Since people have become such heavy adopters of social media, they now rely on these sites for news. The problem is that social media platforms never intended to be news organizations, and there are consequences for informed citizenship when people rely on friends and algorithms to find out about what is happening in the world.

GRADE LEVEL: Elementary/Intermediate

GUIDING QUESTIONS

How has the internet changed the way information is shared or consumed? How do online platforms determine what I see online? Why should we be critical consumers of online information?

READINESS

In preparation for the Minds On discussion, have students complete Activity 5.1 in the days leading up to the lesson. Encourage students to complete their online activity tracking on a specific day so that they can compare the results with their peers.

MINDS ON

1. In pairs or small groups, have students share the information they collected from Activity 5.1 and discuss the following questions.

- How much time did you spend online in the one 24-hour period? Was this surprising, or more or less what you expected?
- What activities took up most of your time?
- Which platforms or websites did you use the most and why?
- Do you know what determines your recommended videos on YouTube?
- What are the different types of information that you see when using a search engine (e.g., articles, videos, ads, websites)? What information comes first? Do you know why?

Teacher Note: According to the 2015 study the ‘Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens’, teenagers (ages 13-18) use an average of nine hours of entertainment media a day and tweens (ages 8-12) use an average of six hours a day, excluding time spent using media for school or homework.

2. Have a closing discussion about the internet and social media. Guiding questions:

- What did you learn through this exercise?
- Have you ever questioned the information you see on the internet? Why or why not?
- What other questions do you have about the internet and social media?

ACTION

1. Review some background information about the internet and social media using the external video sources below.

- [What is the Internet?](#) (Code, June 2016)
- [The History of Social Media: Communication & Connection](#) (Rhetorics of Technology, December 2015)

2. Watch the video ‘Behind the Screens – Who decides what I see online?’ and review its key points.

- Why is it important to think critically about the internet and social media?
- Why do we see what we see online?
- What are the challenges for society?

3. In small groups, have students discuss the advantages and disadvantages of online platforms and social media. Have students use a T-chart to list their responses on large chart paper. Discussion prompts:

- What does the internet help you achieve or accomplish? How does it differ from other options?
- Is it a good or bad thing for communication? In which ways?
- What challenges are associated with using online platforms?

4. Through a whole class discussion, have each group share its list of advantages and disadvantages and create a compiled class list. Alternatively, you could post the T-charts around the classroom and have students view each other's work through a 'Gallery Walk'.

5. As a class, discuss ways to overcome the challenges or disadvantages of online platforms.

- Additional source: [It's not you. Phones are designed to be addicting](#) (Vox, February 2018)

CONSOLIDATION

Ask students to fill out the 3-2-1 Exit Card (Activity 5.2).

- What are three things you learned?
- What are two actions you may take based on what you learned?
- What is one question you still have?