



Article: Social Networks – Freedom or Subjugation?

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Here, Giorgos Longinos, a UCY student and member of the Cypriot CYberSafety Youth Panel, shares his views on the user of social networks.

Technology is nowadays progressing very fast, causing both positive and negative effects. It has improved the quality of peoples' daily routines, such as the opportunity to learn new recipes for foods or the opportunity to be a part of a community where you can give and take advices through difficulties in life etc. It also has a major role in day-to-day communication with other people, since social platforms bring together people from around the world. However, this rapid evolution has not given the opportunity to researchers to examine in depth the negative side effects that may occur from the use of these technologies. We will focus on the influence of social networks on people and on the negative effects that occur by using them. Subsequently, we will propose ways to alleviate these consequences.



Src: <https://facebookbrand.com/wp-content/themes/fb-branding/prj-fb-branding/assets/images/fb-art.png>

Facebook is the biggest social network today created by Marc Zuckeberg in 2004. It has more than 1.86 billion active users (approximately 30% of human population). Some other social platforms are Twitter with 274 million active users and Instagram with 800 million active users.

Social platforms were originally created in order to make the communication and interaction between humans faster and easier. The use of smartphones and personal computers for communication and the ability to send multimedia to our friends was nothing but a dream, even a few decades ago.

Unfortunately, this indirect communication included risks that were very difficult to predict and be effectively addressed at that point. The advertising companies exploited the presence of social networks, in order to send their messages in a more effective and targeted manner. This allowed them to have a more effective influence on the consumers' subconsciousness and create trends of over-consumption and materialism.

Additionally, the recent revelations of the former strain of NSA, CIA and DELL, Mr. Edward Snowden, about how social networks are being misused by the Government of the United States against civilians has created new doubts about their existence. As Mr. Snowden revealed, various telecommunication companies and social networks were providing confidential information to the government not only for plausible reasons such as crime investigations, but also for malicious purposes like threatening of people and illegal use of private information. It is also remarkable that Mr. Snowden chose to sacrifice his personal life and professional career, in order to make these revelations and this indicates the significance he believes they have.

Moreover, many people believe that social networks increase the levels of satisfaction and provide happiness in our life. However, recent scientific researches* have revealed that this does not apply completely. The researches were focused on the biggest social network, Facebook. On the one hand, they revealed that social networks can help in increasing satisfaction for older people, people with lower self-esteem and people with a lot of Facebook friends. On the other hand, they revealed that the adhesion in Facebook can also create dissatisfaction and sadness to users, not only at a personal level but also within a relationship. This could become even worse, if the user is addicted to social networks. Furthermore, the use of social networks may create jealousy and may even become a mean to keep track of the other person's actions in a romantic relationship.



Src: http://s3.amazonaws.com/digitaltrends-uploads-prod/2016/05/spooky_hacker_hands.jpg



Src: https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQ2W-MCO2M-VPTHuqF-pRk9hvii5bDyCGMoY_bLYiQOUalCt-m

Additionally, the opportunity to share our thoughts using the social networks gives all of us some sort of virtual power. According to Mr. Glenn Greenwald (American reporter, writer and partner of Edward Snowden during the publishing of the scandals) the internet can lead to a form of absolute democracy. Unfortunately the variety of social and ethical views that exist today does not allow the vision of Mr. Greenwald to be implemented. Unfortunately, it may lead people that lack social education and have poor cultural cultivation to react in an aggressive and inappropriate manner on the internet. The lack of control and punishment in these social platforms has also allowed the further development of long-standing social problems, such as cyberbullying. In the past, the human and physical contact between people forced everyone to be polite during a communication and

made them think twice and have critical thinking before disrespecting and insulting their interlocutor. Critical thinking is something that has been taken away since many people believe what exists in the internet, in a post, in a comment etc. as something absolutely true without wondering whether it is true or not. Nowadays, the "safety" people feel in their virtual profile and anonymity, gives everyone the opportunity to express bad behaviors and opinions without considering the impact of their attitude on other humans. The lack of control and boundaries gives space for views that may insult, harass or hurt other people.

But how can we face this problem? How can we protect ourselves from these negative effects? Undoubtedly the most important part of solving a problem is to understand that the problem exists. This is what Mr. Snowden tried to do with his revelations and this was my main target when writing this article. Based on what I have mentioned before, someone could say that the negative effects of social networks are so many that it is better to avoid using them.



In my opinion this is very extreme solution and nearly impossible as many companies and social groups somehow impose the use of social networks. Furthermore, it is up to each individual how much she uses the social networks, the way she uses them and the way she lets them affect and change her. We have to understand and accept that social networks are a form of virtual reality and are different or irrelevant from real life. Have you ever considered how many of the people that judge you positively or negatively in the social networks

would ever do the same in face-to-face communication? Also the same implies to the hundreds of thousands or even million followers or friends that a person may have through these platforms. Do they really care about you or your problems? It is your choice if you want to use the social networks only for communication reasons or if you want to take under consideration other people's comments and views. You always have the choice to turn off an electronic device when you feel that it causes negative feelings like anxiety, oppression and distress to you. You have to understand that the online life is not your real life and that you don't have to let your feelings and decisions be affected by social networks. The key is to use social networks wisely.



Src:

http://cache.gawkerassets.com/assets/images/7/2011/04/0404_laptop.jpg

Concluding, it is vital for you to remember and keep in mind that you don't have to pay a lot of attention to everything you face on the internet and that it is very important to think critically about everything on the internet. Regarding social platforms, you have to know that they are just a virtual reality and only you can determine how much importance and influence they have on your life and psychology. Finally, you always have the right to leave this online world by closing the device whenever something bothers you or makes you feel sad.

*Reference to the following scientific articles: Elphinston & Noller, 2011

Muise et al., 2009

Hudson et al., 2015

McAndrew & Shah, 2013

Kim & Lee, 2011

Vigil & Wu, 2015

Penard & Mayol, 2015

Srivastava, 2015

Rosen et al., 2013

Moreno et al., 2011

Other sources: No Place to Hide (Greenwald book), 2014

www.statista.com