

Issue Overview: Are social networking sites good for our society?

By ProCon.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.29.16

Word Count **1,011**



A girl browses the social networking site Facebook on July 10, 2007 in London, England. Photo: Photo: Chris Jackson/ Getty Image

Seventy-six percent of American adults online were using social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and Pinterest as of July 2015. This is up from just 26 percent in 2008. On social media sites like these, users may create biographical profiles, communicate with friends and strangers, do research, and share thoughts, photos, music, links and more.

Proponents of social networking sites say that the online communities promote increased communication between friends and family and offer valuable access to educational materials. They say the sites help foster social and political change and allow information to spread rapidly.

Opponents of social networking say that the sites prevent face-to-face communication and waste time. They say social media negatively affects children's brains and behavior, and helps to spread false and potentially dangerous information.

The Beginnings Of Social Media

SixDegrees.com is considered the first social networking site. It existed from 1997-2001. Other social networking sites soon followed, such as Friendster in 2002, MySpace in 2003, Facebook in 2004, Twitter in 2006, Pinterest in 2009 and Google+ in 2012.

In October of 2012, Facebook reached one billion monthly users worldwide, making it the most popular social networking site with 1 in 7 people on the planet as members. Today, Facebook reports 1.8 billion monthly users worldwide.

According to Pew Research Center, 79 percent of U.S. adults who go online also use Facebook. Every day, Facebook users log 4.5 billion "Likes," 4.75 billion content shares and over 300 million photo uploads. As of November 2016, 31 percent of online adults in the U.S. use Pinterest, 32 percent use Instagram, and 24 percent use Twitter. Twitter has 317 million monthly active users. Over 500 million tweets are sent daily.

User Ages And Habits

As the sites have become increasingly popular, the user base has expanded from teenagers and young adults to include more people over the age of 50. Facebook began as a site for college students, but after two years it opened registration to everyone. As of January 2014, about 23 percent of users were 18 to 24 years old, 24 percent were 15 to 34 years old, 31 percent were ages 35 to 54, and almost 16 percent were 55 and older.

As of February 2014, nearly two-thirds of social media users accessed sites from their computers once a day. Nearly half of smartphone owners visited a social networking site every day. Two in 5 Americans have used social media at work, while 1 in 5 admits to having logged into social media while in the bathroom.

Social media's largest source of revenue is advertising. The revenue from social media ad sales is expected to reach \$32.9 billion by the end of 2016. This is an increase of 84 percent compared to 2014. Predictions place overall social media revenue at about \$41 billion by 2017.

Social Media During Election Cycle

Social networking sites play a large role in shaping the political landscape. In the 2016 presidential race, candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump consistently campaigned via social networking sites. The first presidential election to be significantly affected by social media was the 2008 presidential race between Barack Obama and John McCain. More than a quarter of U.S. voters younger than 30 reported that they obtained information about the 2008 presidential race from social media.

On June 12, 2009, the White House announced that it was joining Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Flickr. Joining the social media sites was part of the Obama administration's efforts to "reform our government so that it is more efficient, more transparent and more creative."

As of September 8, 2011, 35 global heads of state had Twitter accounts. More than 40 percent of global religious leaders like the Dalai Lama and the pope were on Twitter, as well. The 2012 presidential election set the record for most-tweeted event with more than 327,00 tweets per minute being sent when Obama was announced the winner. The image of Obama and his wife that Obama posted upon his reelection with the caption "Four more years" became the most re-tweeted tweet with over 816,883 re-tweets as of Nov. 19, 2012. This broke Justin Bieber's previous record of over 200,000 re-tweets.

In 2010, anti-government protests in Tunisia spawned the Arab Spring, a wave of revolutionary demonstrations in countries across the Middle East and North Africa. The protests were largely fueled and organized by social media. The governments of those countries censored and attempted to shut down the social media sites. In response, Hillary Clinton, who was the U.S. Secretary of State at that time, said the United States strongly supports free expression, including the use of social media.

More Harm Than Good?

Companies worldwide struggle to manage employee social network access at work for business purposes. In 2012, more than half of employees surveyed reported visiting non-work related websites. Many businesses fear that social media endangers their businesses' security.

Seven million households that use Facebook reported problems in 2012. These ranged from someone using a login without permission to being threatened online or in person. Phishing, the act of attempting to acquire personal information for identity theft, increased 240 percent on social networking sites from 2008 to 2009.

A January 2015 study published in the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology found that college freshmen averaged more than two hours a day on Facebook, a habit that harmed their grades. Sophomores and juniors only experienced a negative impact on their grade point averages when they used Facebook while studying. By senior year, the time spent on social media was not affecting their grades.

Social media is now pervasive in our world. As existing social networks continue to expand, niche social networking sites are being created for educators, medical professionals and other groups. Meanwhile, new social media sites are popping up regularly. They are all accessible 24 hours a day via computer, tablet, smartphone and other Internet-enabled devices.

Proponents of social media cheer on the benefits and possible advances to society that these networks may bring. Meanwhile, dissenters worry the dangers and wasted time far outweigh any benefit.

Quiz

- 1 How does the article develop the idea that Facebook has encouraged older adults to use social media?
- (A) by describing the features of Facebook that make it easy for all to use
 - (B) by comparing Facebook to other social media sites that target only young subscribers
 - (C) by pointing out that Facebook was originally available only to college students but opened registration to everyone in 2006
 - (D) by listing the percentage of users who belonged to Facebook in 2014 compared to the number who are expected to belong by 2017
- 2 Which sentence from the article BEST develops a central idea?
- (A) Predictions place overall social media revenue at about \$41 billion by 2017.
 - (B) The governments of those countries censored and attempted to shut down the social media sites.
 - (C) In 2012, more than half of employees surveyed reported visiting non-work related websites.
 - (D) Meanwhile, new social media sites are popping up regularly.
- 3 Which statement BEST represents how social media was used during the 2008 presidential campaign?
- (A) Barack Obama broke several social media records by utilizing Twitter to beat his opponent and win reelection.
 - (B) Candidates Barack Obama and John McCain both used social media to the same degree in order to influence voters.
 - (C) Leaders around the globe used social media sites to share their thoughts and hopes about the election with Americans.
 - (D) A significant number of voters under the age of 30 used social media sites to get their information about the candidates.

- 4 What are the two central ideas of the article?
- (A) Social media usage is growing rapidly among all age groups; there is much debate about whether the use of social media is beneficial or harmful to society.
 - (B) Social media usage is growing rapidly among adults but is becoming less popular with young people; there is much debate about whether the use of social media is beneficial or harmful to society.
 - (C) Social media sites are popular with businesses that wish to advertise to college students; social media usage is growing rapidly among all age groups.
 - (D) Social media has replaced television advertising as the most effective way to influence voters in presidential elections; social media sites are popular with businesses that wish to advertise to college students.

Answer Key

- 1 How does the article develop the idea that Facebook has encouraged older adults to use social media?
- (A) by describing the features of Facebook that make it easy for all to use
 - (B) by comparing Facebook to other social media sites that target only young subscribers
 - (C) by pointing out that Facebook was originally available only to college students but opened registration to everyone in 2006**
 - (D) by listing the percentage of users who belonged to Facebook in 2014 compared to the number who are expected to belong by 2017
- 2 Which sentence from the article BEST develops a central idea?
- (A) Predictions place overall social media revenue at about \$41 billion by 2017.
 - (B) The governments of those countries censored and attempted to shut down the social media sites.
 - (C) In 2012, more than half of employees surveyed reported visiting non-work related websites.**
 - (D) Meanwhile, new social media sites are popping up regularly.
- 3 Which statement BEST represents how social media was used during the 2008 presidential campaign?
- (A) Barack Obama broke several social media records by utilizing Twitter to beat his opponent and win reelection.
 - (B) Candidates Barack Obama and John McCain both used social media to the same degree in order to influence voters.
 - (C) Leaders around the globe used social media sites to share their thoughts and hopes about the election with Americans.
 - (D) A significant number of voters under the age of 30 used social media sites to get their information about the candidates.**

- 4 What are the two central ideas of the article?
- (A) **Social media usage is growing rapidly among all age groups; there is much debate about whether the use of social media is beneficial or harmful to society.**
 - (B) Social media usage is growing rapidly among adults but is becoming less popular with young people; there is much debate about whether the use of social media is beneficial or harmful to society.
 - (C) Social media sites are popular with businesses that wish to advertise to college students; social media usage is growing rapidly among all age groups.
 - (D) Social media has replaced television advertising as the most effective way to influence voters in presidential elections; social media sites are popular with businesses that wish to advertise to college students.