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Subject Area - Information Technology

Internet Addiction

1. Introduction

Internet has been the buzzword for the people around the world in the last decade. Very few people will disagree about the fact that everyone likes to do most of their activities in the most easiest and flexible way possible. Ease and Flexibility is what Internet has provided to the mankind irrespective of profession or leisure based activity. Today internet is widely used by the business world for conducting their daily chores and by individuals to interact, learn and relax. Almost everything can be done online even if it is not in its true physical sense. The multifaceted benefits of internet are so compelling that even governments are taking the initiative to include it in their national policymaking. There is absolutely no doubt in the authors mind that Internet does provide a lot of convenience to the society but is that all? In this report the author will elaborate the darker side of internet and its implications on the individuals and society on the whole.

2. Internet Addiction

When the government starts actively promoting the use of internet nationwide, people ranging from every age group are bound to venture into the cyberspace. Many users utilize the perils of internet and use it for the right purpose only but others fall prey to the dark side of internet. These people who are lured into the dark work internet are usually categorized as Internet addicts. Addiction may be considered as the condition of being habitually or compulsively occupied with or involved in something. In most cases it includes alcoholism, drug addiction, smoking, gambling and watching television etc. Previous research shows that internet can also be addictive [Griffiths, 1995; 1996]. An in depth look into the literature suggest that there are two different views while stating internet as addictive. On one side a collection of researchers believe that internet addiction can be compared with substance addiction [Welsh 1999, Anderson 2000] whereas others are of the opinion that it has relevance with pathological gambling [Davis 1999, Greenfield 2000]. There is a lot of difference in opinion and the available research does not pin point any evidence based cause for the internet to be termed as addictive [Grohol, 1999]. Even after the disagreement among researchers the following activities are generally categorized as addictive on the internet: Online Chatting, Online Shopping, Online Gambling, Exchanging messages using Online Message Boards, Browsing explicit sexual content and to some extent using emails. Few of these like gambling, shopping and viewing of sexual content are accepted as addiction with more ease than the others but the fact that each of them can have severe implications can be seen from the discussion in the next section.

3. Implications of Internet Addiction

In the previous section a list of possible online activities were presented which may be categorized as addiction. Most of the mentioned categorize are causing major problems in the main categories of everyday life including family, work, relationship and children.

In family arena a member of the family who has become an internet addict tends to withdraw from the family and spend a lot of time surfing the net and in a way moves away from the family. In many cases the other family members are of

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the view that internet had hijacked their close one from them. In relationships the partners who have ventured into the world of cyberspace start giving preference to internet over their other partner and are resulting in divorce in many cases [Welford, 1999]. In professional life or rather in the office people are spending more time in exchanging personal emails and messages through chatting rather than concentrating on their work and are losing productive time. Even after many warnings the employees are continuing to do so and as a result are losing their jobs. Another major problem that has increased substantially over the last decade is the use of the internet for sex related activities. This becomes even worse when children are exposed to such explicit material. This will be covered in detail in the following sections. Online gambling has become the second most hated menace after online pornography as this gives a lot of people an easy option to gamble 24 hours a day sitting in a relaxed atmosphere. As a result of this more and more people are becoming bankrupt.

Apart from the above consequences there are many other smaller damages that internet is having on individuals like provoking them to lie and cover-up for their addiction and keep secrets from their close ones. An entire book can be written on this topic citing numerous real life examples but due to the limitations of this report the major negative effects of internet addiction therefore may be summarized as Families in crisis, Lost Jobs, College expulsion, destroyed marriage, deepening depression, mounting debts, broken trust, pedophiles stalking kids and teenagers breaking down.

4. Children and Internet

Across the past twenty years the use of Internet has changed the practices and procedures of nearly all forms of endeavor within business and governance. "The advent of computer technology has brought many kinds of opportunities and some of these, not surprisingly, are of a criminal nature". (Bainbridge 1993). The Internet contains harmful pornographic material. In the long list of threats to child innocence and sexual safety, the Internet is the latest, according to Jenkins (2001), a historian at Pennsylvania State University. In this case, Jenkins argues in *Beyond Tolerance*, the threat is very real.

Warning Signs

The Internet is an awfully tough venue to police. What is punishable in one country may be legal in another; aliases are common; Web sites can be put up and taken down in a few hours. Moreover, Web sites and their contents are often do-it-yourself jobs. Many parents ask their children how much time they are spending on Internet. But many kids lie especially when they are already addicted. Some warning signs are listed below to ascertain whether the child's Internet use has progressed to overuse.

Excessive fatigue – Child struggling to get up early in the morning, his drowsiness increased changes in sleep patterns.

Academic Problems – Child's grades decreasing, poor performance in class tests etc.

Withdrawal from friends – Child becoming increasingly distant and uncommunicative with the family.

Declining Interests in Hobbies – Child losing interests in his hobbies as Internet has become his new hobby which is an obsession that renders all other activities meaningless.

Disobedience – Not listening to parents and being disobedient and telling lies about the usage of Internet.

If a child demonstrates any of these warning signs he might be addicted to the Internet.

Children's Motives for Using the Internet

Today's children and adolescents are in many ways the defining users of the digital media, including the Internet

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(Montgomery, 2000). Recent survey research suggests that teenagers spend more time online than adults, and they more often use e-mail, a mobile phone, and instant text messaging than do adults (Kraut et al, 1999; NOP Research Group, 2000a, 2000b). Now that the majority of American and European children and adolescents regularly go online (NOP Research Group, 2000a; Turow & Nir, 2000), the time is right to examine how and why children use the Internet.

Many studies have investigated the motives for using the Internet but they are mainly focussed on adult users (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Perse & Dunn, 1998). These studies have yielded mixed results. Ferguson and Perse (2000) found that entertainment was the most salient motive for visiting the Web, followed by passing time, social information, and relaxation, respectively. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) found that information seeking and entertainment were equally important motives for using the Internet. Convenience, passing time, and interpersonal utility were less salient reasons for going online.

In a study conducted by Valkenburg and Soeters (2003) children's motives for using the Internet were explored. Children can use the Internet to seek information or entertainment, to relieve boredom, to play games, or for social interaction. According to their study the most important motive for using the Internet was affinity for computers, followed by information seeking. Entertainment and boredom avoidance were the third most important motives. Online social interaction and off-line social interaction were the least important motives for using the Internet. Children's open-ended responses about their negative experiences showed a significant age interaction. Whereas violence on the Internet was more often mentioned by younger children, online harassment was slightly more often mentioned by older children. On the other hand, at the end of middle childhood, children are more likely to use the Internet for social interactions about relationships and sexual activity, which might increase the chance of online harassment. As they enter adolescence, children start to be interested in sensationalist media content due to their increased need for sensation (Zuckerman, 1979).

Due to teenagers' curiosity and interest in relationships and sexuality, they seem more likely to give out personal information, which may potentially make them vulnerable. Parents and educators should be well aware of this risk, which can be greatly minimized by some family rules about computer use.

Child Pornography – Dangers of Sexual Content

Concerns regarding the internet relate to commercialism, privacy and, most of all, sexual material (Turow, 1999). To what extent inappropriately sexual or pornographic websites are experienced as problematic for young people and their families is less clear (Sutter, 2000). Although estimates and definitions vary widely, at least one study mapping online pornography identifies much that is upsetting or embarrassing for children (Von Feilitzen and Carlsson, 2000). Opinion polls support such a conclusion: a Canadian survey of parents suggests that one in five children have found undesirable sexual material online (Media-Awareness, 2000); the American Kaiser Family Foundation survey (Kaiser Foundation, 2000) found that one in three teens has seen pornography online and that children are more likely than adults to trust online information.

Child pornography is regarded as qualitatively different from adult pornography. It is almost universally illegal and one needs to confront the possibility that the ease of use and relative anonymity afforded by the Internet leads some individuals to join these communities committing terrible crimes.

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Online Chat room – Protecting children from paedophiles on the Internet

Chat rooms, bulletin boards, newsgroups or other messaging services, collectively known as chat services are set up with a particular hobby in mind or as a website just for children or teenagers. Their purpose is to allow individuals who share common interests to talk about them with like-minded people in one shared virtual place. Unfortunately, online chat rooms can lure children into a potentially dangerous situation and these online chat rooms pose a great risk to children.

Legislation designed to catch those who use online facilities to abuse children should be developed as soon as possible. However, whilst this is developed, reliance on the regulation of online chat services should not fall solely at the feet of the ISP. Parental responsibility for child access and use of the internet should also be emphasized. And, to this end, the publicizing of helpful codes and good practice guides for parents to offer support are of as much importance in the short-term as the advancement of legislation detailing the responsibilities of the users, abusers and service providers in the long-run. After all, in real life, there are places where parents can leave their children quite happily and they would be safe to play unsupervised, and there are others where they would never dream of leaving children on their own. The same rules should apply in cyberspace.

It is not surprising that specific Internet usage characteristics and activities are associated with increased odds of harassment. As reported previously (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2002), chat room and e-mail use are significantly related to online harassment. For example, 16% of harassers use the Internet most frequently for chat room use versus 8% of non-harassers.

5. Conclusion

From the above discussion any non internet user may see internet as the most evil technology that happened to mankind. This is not entirely true and one must weigh the positive aspect of technology with the negative ones before deciding on it. Too much of anything is bad and the same applies for internet as well. Regulated use of internet even in leisure activities like chatting can be very fruitful and will make our life much easier than ever before. The nuclear technology can be used to create electricity and cure people from cancer at one end and kill millions of people on the other hand. Similarly internet has its good and bad effects. Everything depends on us and how we use it.

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