

Manali Mukherjee

Human Rights Essay Contest

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Human Rights in the Digital Age

Illegal drugs and software. Although at first glance these words seem to have no correlation, they do have one significant thing in common. “They are the only two industries that refer to their customers as ‘users’.” This observation made by computer scientist and professor at Yale University, Edward Tufte, signifies that unlike most industries, in software the primary goal is not to serve us. In this day and age, our existence on the internet begins before we are even conscious of it. And despite this, there is a concerning dearth of appropriate new laws and regulations to protect us. As the internet becomes an inevitable part of existing in our rapidly advancing society, it is essential that we truly understand our rights regarding our digital presence, and whether these rights truly fall into line with the human rights that we are all entitled to.

We provide information through being on the internet, both knowingly and unknowingly, at a colossal rate. A prime example of this is social media. We knowingly share posts, comments, messages, etc. However, what many are not aware of is that nearly every single action taken on these apps is recorded and used to further develop them. As the software industry has become increasingly competitive, the collection and analysis of our data as consumers have increased with it. Our every search, tap, share, time of engagement, location, etc. is information that may be collected, analyzed, and sold to affiliates and partners who aim to make improvements. Something to note about social media apps is that they are free. And because social media is free, it is easy to be deceived into believing that it still serves us. However, this is not the case. Although seemingly serving us, we are not the priority of social media companies. We are the product. Because these apps are free, companies must make a profit in some other way. And this way is the advertising of products. To maximize the profit that they make through these

advertisements, our every action is analyzed to make sure that we are viewing and engaging with them. This analysis of our every behavior on social media is controversial, as it seems to possibly be a violation of one of our most basic human rights; The right to privacy. No action on the internet is ever truly private. Although most likely mentioned in the pages and pages of privacy policies that everyone so enthusiastically reads (not really), many users of social media would be uncomfortable to hear of the way their data is actually handled, and how the aim of this data being shared is to develop apps to become more and more difficult to get off of. And as a study from Science Direct shows, “210 million people are estimated to suffer from internet and social media addictions”. So the tremendous amount of data collected truly is benefiting social media companies. After all, more time spent on the app results in more ads viewed, and more profit gained by these companies. And that is exactly what matters to them. Profit. Even if it involves violating the basic human right to privacy.

This past summer, there was a surge of activism centering on the Black Lives Matter movement. A video of a 46-year-old black man having his neck kneeled on by a police officer for eight minutes and forty-six seconds rapidly spread across the internet like wildfire. The man’s name was George Floyd. This was the catalyst for international outrage. Social media quickly became something to foster resources, information, the voices of Black people, and so much more. In June, many noticed that on the popular video-sharing app called TikTok, videos with #BlackLivesMatter or #GeorgeFloyd in the caption were gaining zero views. This infuriated a multitude of people. After some time, TikTok came out and said that they would be creating a “creator diversity council” to prevent an instance like this from occurring again. However, this is not enough. Because the problem goes far beyond this singular situation involving Tiktok. For the first time in history, many have the ability to spread and consume information all with the simple tap of a screen. And while this has both numerous benefits and pitfalls, there is one extremely alarming issue that arises with it. The ability for major movements to become vulnerable to censorship, which threatens another basic human right; the freedom of opinion. The violation of this right becomes all the more unnerving when considering the blind trust that many people very naively place in the internet.

This censorship creates the risk of influencing opinion in a way that undermines coming to personal conclusions, for which learning as much information as possible is crucial. Although some regulation of free opinion on the internet may be necessary, we must question the motives of this censorship while remembering that the freedom of opinion has been challenged many times before. However, overcoming these challenges has oftentimes been the thing to propel our society forward.

Although there remains a plethora of concerns that involve the internet conflicting with human rights, appropriate change is slowly but surely beginning to occur. For instance, COPPA, which is the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, deals with laws concerning children's protection online. COPPA protects the privacy of children under thirteen by forcing sites that target children to have a full written notice about their disclosure practices and acquiring parental consent. This is a significant stride in the right direction, especially as more and more young kids gain access to the internet. Another example of new laws and regulations concerning human rights online being put into place are the "Right to be Forgotten Laws" in the European Union. These laws give both individuals and corporations the ability to request that their information be deleted from certain sites. Through small changes like these, we are moving in the direction of a world where human rights do not have to be neglected in order to exist in this increasingly digital world.

All things considered, it is clear that numerous human rights are being compromised in this Digital Age. However, the issue getting worse is not an inescapable outcome. Although the internet comes with many complications, there is also power in the opportunity we now have for information to spread rapidly. Many companies have been held accountable for their violations of human rights through the very services that they provide us with. There is much work to do, but luckily, our voices can be heard more than ever before.

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