

The harm of digital pornography in real lives

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Boys online

It's a stunning scene, yet an everyday occurrence.

Two British teenage boys explain the different categories of hard core pornography available to them with a couple of clicks online. Then one of them laments that he can't have a real relationship with a girl because both his mind and his peer group's attitudes have been poisoned by porn.

Polis Intern Anuradha Santhanam reports on the latest Polis Media Agenda Talk by Beeban Kidron, the director of hit movie 'Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason' and most recently, 'In Real Life', a documentary about young people and the Internet.

We are a generation 'enslaved to devices', says Kidron, with statistics suggesting that a few years ago, people checked their smartphones from anywhere between 150 to 300 times a day, a number that has likely multiplied since.

Internet 'evils' have real world consequences like eating disorders, which have seen several young girls and women jeopardise their health in order to fit a specific, internet-propagated mould of what looks 'good'.



Beeban Kidron at LSE

There are certainly some unsavoury things brought about by the internet – with the ubiquity of pornography, both men's and women's ideas of body image, sex and sexuality are becoming increasingly warped and unrealistic. A young boy in Kidron's documentary says, of viewing pornography: "I want my first to look like that. If she doesn't, she isn't it." As Beeban Kidron puts it, women's bodies become subject to a popularity contest.

Facebook, too, was originally conceptualised to rate the 'hotness' of people on it.

7% of the girls Kidron interviewed had had group sex, with a staggering 50% of them admitting they felt pressured into it,

that it was not consensual. The internet, says Kidron, causes anxiety to multiply, making the youth feel as if they have been forced into doing things they would rather not.

This addiction to the internet and social media in particular has taken over our lives. With people carrying their phones with them everywhere they go, even into the toilet, there is no neutral environment anymore.

According to Kidron, social media is designed specifically to be addictive and cause a dopamine rush. With the volumes of people actually using social media for as long as they do, they perform free labour for companies, with their web use and data creating value that can be sold by the firm they are willingly handing it over to for free. Is the amount of money these websites spend on engaging users proportional to the amount they earn *from* these users? Probably not.

Privacy has all but become an alien concept with the internet. Ironically, however, the anonymity of the internet has allowed more and more people to say whatever they wish to with no liability or responsibility.

This is good and bad. Anonymity could enable people part of totalitarian states, under oppressive regimes, or simply average disgruntled dissenters to express their true feelings without the fear of persecution or reprimand. However, this has led to a major issue cropping up among the youth – cyber-bullying, which has led to a fair number of teenage suicides.

Snooping is another major issue with the internet today – it is not just government agencies that track user data, but companies as well, and they admit it. Larry Page once said that Google “would not rest until we know what you want before you do.”

What is ironic, says Kidron, is how Mark Zuckerberg is taking away the privacy of his users, but bought four houses around his own to ensure his own seclusion.

This, however, seems to suggest Zuckerberg, or Facebook, or any social media website, for that matter, is wresting people’s privacy from them, forcing them to join websites, which is not entirely true. A large part of the desire to be part of social media stems from a desire to want to ‘fit in’, to be part of a community; a form of cultural hegemony, as it were, but one for which the internet is not entirely responsible. It is merely a transfer of a tangible, social need to fit in to a different medium of communication.

The only exception is that while the internet is a much, much larger public sphere, an entity, perhaps, that connects every corner of the world, the transparency of the communication has all but disappeared, at least for the user.

“If the internet is a public sphere”, says Kidron, “why does everyone have a balaclava over their head?”

This report by Polis Intern Anuradha Santhanam

Photographs of Beeban Kidron by Polis intern Asuka Kageura

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