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In the past few decades, American culture has become heavily reliant on the internet. It is used for searching, purchasing, and the like. One of the main ways the internet is used, however, is for networking. Americans have found a new form of communication that has quickly invaded almost every aspect of life. Social networking websites offer a new and exciting way for people to connect, communicate, and converse. While there are some people who are not involved in the recent explosion of online networking, the majority of Americans are in constant use of one form of networking or another. There is a debate, however, on whether this new fad is harmful or beneficial to present day cultures.

Although each social networking site has a different structure and function, all sites have generally the same concept. The term “networking” refers to a relationship initiation, where people can communicate (Boyd). While some sites focus on helping users meet new friends, other sites focus on letting users communicate with friends they already have. Overall, the main purpose of social networking is letting people make or continue relationships. Many of the original social networking sites focused on helping users meet new people. Users would enter information about things such as their gender, religion, and views, and the website would connect them with other users who shared similar interests (Dorsch).

The first form of online social networking can be traced back to 1997 when the website SixDegrees.com was set up (Boyd). SixDegrees was designed to connect people and allow them to contact each other whenever necessary. Like many modern day networks, SixDegrees allowed users to create profiles, add friends, and send them messages. Although SixDegrees.com was similar to many successful, present-day social networking sites, it did not succeed. Many believe this was because social networking had not become popular at this time, so SixDegrees did not

have many users (Boyd). Although it did not succeed, SixDegrees.com had all the makings to become a successful social networking website.

Many people wonder how social networking became such a dominant form of communication in American culture. It is obvious, because of SixDegrees.com's failure, that online networking has not always been a vital way to communicate. One of the most apparent reasons social networking has developed rapidly is because of the rise in overall internet use. As technology develops and use of the internet becomes more successful, networking sites looked to take advantage of the growing opportunity. With more people on the internet, more people would be exposed to online social networking. Stanford professor Josh Pasek talks in one of his articles about the rapid increase in internet and online networking. Pasek believes that once the internet became more prominent, people started realizing its potential. It was quickly discovered that a message could be sent from one state to another in a matter of seconds (Patek). Websites such as YouTube, a popular video networking site, would never have been possible on dial-up internet, but with the increase in speed and availability, YouTube and similar websites could develop (Espejo). Because of the internet's advances, online social networking became increasingly accessible.

The sudden increase in the use of online networking has brought about much controversy in the United States. Its communication benefits are being weighed against its unsafe potential. Many people argue that online social networking is extremely beneficial to American society and the world as a whole. Networking sites connect people that otherwise would never communicate with each other (Espejo). Family and friends that live miles away from each other can share everything from pictures to family updates, all within a few seconds.

The business world is also starting to take advantage of all that social networking has to offer. Employers are now using personal profile websites, such as Facebook, to do background checks on potential employees (Espejo). For this reason, it has become important for people using social networking sites to be careful what they put on their profile for the world to view. College admission offices are also checking up on incoming students by viewing their online networking profiles. This gives employers and educators an inside look at their employee or students life outside of the work or school atmosphere.

Many governmental institutions are also using online networking to advance their parties. Legislators, senators, and the like are using online sites to promote their campaigns are even take voting polls (Pasek).

While the practical and recreational uses for social networking are obvious, there are also many dangers that come with online social networking. Researcher Molly Wood argues that one of the biggest problems with social networking is the lifestyle that it produces. Wood believes that Americans are wasting extreme amounts of time on social sites. There have been many cases of child neglect because the parents are spending more time online than with their children (Wood). Wood also believes that people are so involved with their online networking that they are losing basic vital communication skills in real-life interaction.

In a Deloitte study, Arnold Brown discovered what he believes to be a link between networking and a loss of healthy family values in America. With the influx of online marriage and dating games, the rate of divorce and unfaithfulness continued to rise. Like Wood, Brown believes that continued involvement in virtual social worlds is creating a deficit in American society (Brown). People are using websites to break up with partners, get divorces, and have

affairs. Many feel that the virtual world is beginning to take the place of real life in American society.

Researcher Michael Fitzpatrick also believes that the recent online networking outburst is a danger to American society. *Crimes Against Children Research Center* did a study showing the increase in child pornography cases due to the increase in online networking. In 1998, when online networking was just taking off, there were 3,267 child pornography cases. In 2004, during the height of online social networking, there were 106,119 child pornography cases (Fitzpatrick). Because there are no laws in place to regulate adults contacting children on social networking sites, child pornography and other abominations are occurring more regularly.

The regulation of online social networking is a controversial topic. While there is evidence that online networking has caused problems, it is also hard to limit a person's use because of their freedoms. One such example is the age limit on a website like the popular social network, MySpace. MySpace requires its users to make their age public, however there is no regulation to make sure users are being truthful about their age. It is extremely hard for the government, or any individual networking site, to make regulations that limit their site users.

Although regulations are not very common, many websites have put safety measures in place that offer users a sense of privacy. A person can select options that heighten or lessen their protection settings. For example, a user may set their profile so that only known friends and family members can see their pictures. Settings such as these can help protect children or any American against unwanted predators. In early 2011, popular online networking site, Facebook, began offering a safety page that informs parents and lets them keep track of their children's social activity ("Facebook"). Actions such as this are the main way to help regulate against the

unwanted dangers that come with online social networking (Wood). Parents must take an active role in keeping their children safe online.

Another way online networking should be regulated is within the education system. Schools, especially elementary and middle schools should block online sites so that their students cannot access them on school grounds (Wood). This will make sure the school is not responsible for, or encouraging, any dangerous online activity.

Executive marketing consultant, Patrick Driessen, once said “Social media should improve your life, not become your life” (“Facebook”). Encouraging this attitude is the most effective way to regulate online social networking and to make sure it’s being used safely. The new advances in online networking have so many benefits to offer the American society, but users must choose to become educated and take safety precautions in order to reap these benefits.