Computers, Internet, Privacy Essay, Research Paper

When was the first time you used a computer? When was the first time you used the Internet? While the Internet has existed in some form or another for ten to twenty years, the Internet as we know it is only six to seven years old; most of the people who use it today had no clue it even existed less than a decade ago. Yet now the Internet has become an integral part of our daily lives. Many Americans cannot imagine life without a personal computer at home, much less at work. The Internet has led some people to become addicted to surfing the World Wide Web; these “Internet junkies” shun their outside lives in favor of sitting in front of a computer screen ten or twenty hours a day. While these people are the exception, rather than the rule, a large number of people cannot go through a day without checking their e-mail inbox at least a couple of times. The thought is spending a week “off-line” fills many with unease and fear. We have come to rely on computers and the Internet to keep us connected with each other, more so than telephones or television. The Internet has caused a communication revolution, and as such has the power to change society and our roles in it.

While the Internet has in various ways assumed the roles of library, telephone, stockbroker, and local mall, many people are worried about the level of security offered by those who control the Internet. This position paper will be focused on three articles—two from Time Magazine, and one from Rolling Stone. These articles offer differing views of the strengths and weaknesses of the Internet; Toulmin’s informal method of logic will be used to analyze these outlooks to determine their overall validity.

According to Toulman’s informal method of logic, any argument must contain three components in order to be considered complete: one, grounds, which are facts and data that can be used to support a claim; two, warrants, which allow the author to infer certain truths from the grounds; and three, claims, which are any logical conclusions that have been drawn from the grounds. Qualifiers are statements that limit the force of a claim, and rebuttals are conditions wherein claims could be countered.

Although all three of these examples of discourse are textual media, each of them offers an interesting perspective on a variety of issues concerning Internet users. For this reason, it seems justifiable to accept all of these textual examples.

The first Time Magazine article that will be discussed appeared in the December 12, 1994 issue. Entitled “Terror on the Internet”; it was written by Philip Elmer-DeWitt. It is important to note here that this article was the first to be published under the specifically designated heading: “Technology”. This heading joined other weekly features such as “Movies”, “Books”, and “Music”.

Elmer-DeWitt offers the basic claim that the Internet is fragile and “vulnerable to attack”. This is a broad statement to make about a network that was generating such a high level of excitement; this claim is all the more powerful when we realize the context in which it appears. This composition is Time Magazine’s first regular article within its new “Technology” feature; millions of otherwise Internet-ignorant readers are getting their first glimpse of a new era in computers. In this case, their first glimpse was full of misgivings and uncertainties.

Elmer-DeWitt offers a solid set of grounds to support his claim; the article opens with a short anecdote about a couple whose computer and phone have been hacked into and manipulated. He explains that the hackers had used computers at the “root” level at IBM, Sprint, and Pipeline. For a new computer user, this story is already a compelling and potentially frightening one. Consumers who believe that the Internet is completely safe are learning the error of their ways through this article. Elmer-DeWitt goes on to offer more examples: “publicity-hungry lawyers” sending a promotional mailing to more than 5,000 people; General Electric’s Internet link being infiltrated and temporarily shut down; and a “worm” program which grew out of control. He also offers the reader hard statistical data regarding these Internet break-ins; “in the first nine months of 1994,” he writes, “CERT [Computer Emergency Response Team] logged 1,517 incidents—up more than 75% from 1993.” Now that we have the luxury of looking back, we can see that these numbers are very low; as more people have gotten online, more have begun to hack into any systems they can.

Elmer-DeWitt ties his claims and grounds together with a few well-placed warrants. Once he tells the story of the couple who has been the victims of Internet hackers, he describes it as “an Internet nightmare come true” for those who have placed sensitive information online, only to discover that trespassers can gain access to that information as well. He describes the Internet as a “tempting target”, and points out the relative infancy of the technology of firewalls. Steve Bellovin is quoted as saying, “There is no such thing as absolute security. There is only relative risk.” Elmer-DeWitt also states that the Internet is “open and cooperative”, which is both its strength and its weakness. All of these warrants effectively tie the grounds to the claim. Overall, this article offers readers a valid, if pessimistic, view of the Internet and its early role in society. While no qualifiers or rebuttals appear in this article to offer a more balanced view, according to Toulman’s informal method of logic, this is a complete and accurate position.

The second article to be analyzed first appeared in Time Magazine in December of 1999. This article is written by Joshua Cooper Ramo; it is an explanation of why Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon.com, is Time Magazine’s choice as Person of the Year for 1999. Ramo uses this article about Bezos to make two general claims about the Internet: namely, that e-commerce has changed the way that society shops, and that e-commerce has a very promising future.

Ramo cites several grounds to support his claims. First, he discusses consumer dollars spent on goods online—about $15 billion worth; he also points out that businesses have spent $109 billion buying from each other last year. Ramo also notes that Americans spent over $5 billion on Christmas gifts in 1999, more than twice that of 1998. He describes the “New Economics of Internet Commerce”; how the buyer, not the seller, has all of the information if he or she knows where to look. New auction sites are also causing Internet users to change the entire way that prices are set. Informed consumers can decide what something is really worth, and cause the price to change to more accurately reflect that value. Ramo offers the example of an antique calculator that was posted on eBay (an online auction house) for $100; soon after, collectors had driven the price up to $6,500. He also delves into the history of shopping in order to illustrate his claim. “The last great retail revolution was mail order,” he says, which effectively distanced the consumer from the company. With the Internet, the speed of communication makes it possible for consumers to once again feel in close contact with a company—even if that company is thousands of miles away.

It is interesting to point out a comment that Ramo makes about Jeff Bezos: he says, “back in the day when you—frankly, when everyone—was pooh-poohing the idea of online sales, there were a few who believed.” He goes on to describe how Bezos left his job in 1994 and began Amazon.com. This is ironic in light of the previous article that was analyzed. While Elmer-DeWitt was offering doubts about the validity and safety of this new thing called the Internet, Jeff Bezos was pioneering a shopping Mecca of sorts for consumers. While it would be tempting to declare Elmer-DeWitt incorrect in his predictions, hacking is still one of the Internet’s greatest dangers, and privacy issues are only becoming more important to those online.

Ramo ties his grounds and his claims together primarily by pointing out how our skepticism about e-commerce is consistently misplaced. “But wait a minute,” he says, “didn’t you say… ‘Who would buy books online’? And wasn’t it you who said, ‘I’d never buy plane tickets online’? And mortgages?…Concert tickets and CDs? ‘But I’d never’, you said. Yes, you will. You are.” This article makes good use of grounds to support the claims that have been made. The warrants tie the article together well, and help to organize Ramo’s ideas about the effects of e-commerce as well as its future. According to Toulman’s informal method of logic, this article is a sound one.

The final article to be analyzed is a short editorial piece published in Rolling Stone magazine in March of 2000. Written by Jeff Goodell, it is entitled, “Who Needs Privacy?”

Goodell offers the claims that one, our consumer habits and much of our personal information is being logged into corporate databases every time we surf the web and two, that because this information is being used only for corporate benefit it is acceptable for us to be electronically “trailed”. He also states that “anyone who thinks anything on a computer…is really private is dangerously na?ve.”

As grounds for these claims, Goodell uses his personal experience with RealJukebox. He learned that RealJukebox, which he has used to listen to music in the past, had been “ surreptitiously sending users’ playlists back to RealNetworks, where the company was logging them into its database.”

The only warrant that Goodell offers is the statement that, “in effect, the company was spying on its customers.” Most of this article is his own speculation—he offers the opinion that this kind of consumer “trailing” is harmless; as he says, “these corporations…don’t care about your politics or your sex life—they just want to sell you stuff.” This article does, however, contain both a qualifier and a rebuttal.

His qualifier points out that these corporate databases may not be as useful as they seem in theory; this is due to the overwhelmingly large numbers of people using the Internet every day. There are just too many keystrokes to record them all.

Goodell’s rebuttal states that lawmakers are pushing for laws that limit the amount of information that can be gathered about a user without his or her permission.

In this article, Goodell’s warrant does not offer a smooth transition between his claims and grounds. He offers the reader weak claims and weaker grounds. Overall, this article is a poor one according to Toulman’s informal method of logic.

By analyzing a variety of discourse devoted to a single topic, especially such a controversial and flexible topic as the Internet, a clearer picture of the past, present, and future begins to emerge. Choppy events in our lives become one smooth, full discourse, and many tentative theories can be proved or disproved once we look at the big picture. It is important to focus on the changing world around us, and to be certain that we understand it completely. For this reason, it is also important to be thoughtful, attentive readers; we need to be able to separate facts from opinions and solid ideas from weak ones. This will enable us to better comprehend all aspects of life and make our own decisions based on accurate, lucid information.

Bibliography

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