

# Using the internet is all about balance

by MARK PAVILONS

Famous author J.K. Rowling said the internet has been both a boon and a curse for teenagers.

Ever since we were given access to the internet and well, everything on earth, it has been viewed with trepidation.

Sure, getting stuff online is like taking a drink from a fire hydrant ? everything all at once. It can be overwhelming.

Our internet prowess has been fine-tuned over the years, to the point where many of us, of all ages, are quite proficient at navigating the web.

Kent Conrad once said access to computers and the internet has become a basic need for education in our society.

Well, the Peel District School Board, Toronto District and Catholic Boards, and the Ottawa District Board have all filed lawsuits, claiming platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok are negligent. They're designed for ?compulsive use??and have actually ?rewired??the way children think and learn.

This, they claim, is leaving educators holding the bag and cleaning up after this social networking mess.

Being addicted to these outlets, the boards say, negatively impacts students' learning and mental health. That puts a strain on the boards' resources, taking away the focus on actual instruction.

Ok, people, while the boards may have valid points on the impacts of social media today, just whose responsibility is it?

Many boards have introduced smart boards and tablets to aid in instruction. Opening the internet to students is like opening Pandora's Box and the boards would have likely studied the pros and cons before choosing this route.

As well, almost every teenager, even some pre-teens, have smart phones. This is their connection to the world and each other.

You can ban cell phones from classrooms, but once the bell rings, all bets are off. The kids likely dash madly to their lockers to grab their phones and begin the cycle again.

Yes, the internet can contain darkness, but it can also be a source of light. For youngsters, especially during the pandemic, it was their only source of human contact. It was their lifeline.

Sure, it is also a source of maliciousness, and a breeding ground for hatred, racism and sexism. But these things have always been part of our world. And it has been our responsibility to protect ourselves from it and expose it for others to see.

Using social media is our society's self-imposed Catch-22. We want everything at our fingertips and damn the consequences. It's typical of our species to create some new marvel without proper instruction into its long-term use.

The internet, according to Eric Schmidt, ?is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had.?

It's been a little over a decade since the iPhone has set the standard. And boy has it altered almost every aspect of our behaviour.

I was reluctant to join the iPhone club, being well served with a small-screen Nokia, Star Tac and Razr.

My wife and kids jumped on the smart phone band wagon immediately, and urged me to join with my latest gizmo.

Previously, I used my phone in emergencies, connecting with loved ones and for work-related purposes.

I used my iPad for emails and surfing the net. Now, I can do everything, even online banking and renewing my mortgage, from this nifty device. I can take and send photos.

Be careful what you wish for, is a sentiment that has plagued mankind since the beginning. But this is no fairy tale, it's real-world domination!

Jon Stewart observed the internet is just a world passing around notes in a classroom. How fitting.

Yes, it can be a huge distraction in the school setting, if not monitored. But if it's used as intended as a tool to further instruction and provide access to information it can do wonders.

When we Boomers were kids, some were brains, others average and some were not book learners.

There's no question that the internet can help those who are not academic aces.

And the social network platforms the boards single out are a cornucopia for opinion, humour and current affairs. If you want to know what young people are talking about, these are the very places to go.

Sure, they tend to be filled with mindless drivel and outrageous images. But if a young person can successfully navigate through the debris and filter out the negativity, it will definitely give them some useful skills.

There's no turning the clock back on the internet it's here to stay. And it continues to evolve. Most of the online platforms have implemented some sort of code of conduct, to reduce the worst of the worst. The jury is out on its current effectiveness.

But it presents a whole new subject matter for discussion, debate and analysis, at all levels of education. I'm sure there are some very interesting university studies and papers being done on the subject.

I agree that it can be very distracting and I'm guilty of it. When I get home after work and sink into the sofa, I'm often drawn to my phone, playing games, checking Facebook and shopping on eBay. I admit that it has impacted our family's communication.

But it's also a source of comfort at times and allows us to get things done efficiently when needed.

Like everything in our lives, it's all about balance. It's about pros and cons.

Has the internet made human existence better? In many ways, yes. Is it something to be feared? No. Is it something to take with a grain of salt? Definitely.

Unplugging from time to time may ease our dependency.

But I think we're well past breaking free of the most important technological innovation of all time.

To not teach it to our young is wrong.

What the internet will be is what society makes it. That's all of us. We can shape our future.