

## **A World Wide Problem**

By Amber Miller

Our civilization was once a part of a society foreign to the World Wide Web. That civilization sought their knowledge through word of mouth, testimony, and written words scribed on the pages of bound books. A civilization with so much culture, without the ability to share it with the rest of the world. Yet now, with a few key strokes, and a double click of the mouse we can instantly be transported from Madagascar to Guyana, from Kazakhstan to Canada and that foreign world no longer seems foreign anymore. It is in that convenience that we use the internet consistently and negligently in our classrooms, and in doing so the internet is presented as an unproblematic resource, yet just like maps and photographs; it too is a biased perception of reality, which should not be taken as the sole truth.

As an American society we have come to value the internet. "Since 1993, the internet started to take off. At present the internet has spread to more than 180 countries and regions...available to 120 million users" (Guangrong, 1998, pg. 1). If we need to research penguins then we search information sites on the computer. If we need a recipe for chicken fried rice then we seek the internet. In many ways the internet has proven itself to be a vessel which transports knowledge to multiple gateways. Guangrong says (1998), "The internet contains the biggest resource of information in the entire world," and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge is power (Guangrong, 1998, pg 1). We live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and no matter what way you cut it we also have 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. 21<sup>st</sup> century learners are very different from students educated decades ago by simple word of mouth and educational textbooks. Our students have the internet, they use it without question and their needs and wants are all fulfilled by a virtual reality, which they take as the bible.

There is much good that comes out of using the internet, in that it is quick, connects people in various parts of the world, and can be used as a differentiating learning tool. Often, sprucing up social studies curriculum, which often seems boring and disjointed (Heafner, 2004, pg. 1). Yet, even in this good many societies, like our American society become too reliant on it, and begin to generate an abundance of generalizations and stereotypes about the world, which they continue to take with them to various other learning platforms. The increasing need to acquire knowledge has made our society reliable on the internet. Whitworth and Berson cite the idea that, “Wide concerns with students using the internet, include inappropriate sites, and sites that simply contain false or inaccurate information” (Berson, Berson & Ralsston, 1999; Hoj, 1998; Risinger, 1998). Gibson and McKay (2001) indicate that, “Research tells us that, as with other forms of media, students (and adults) are inclined to view the computer as a neutral conduit, to accept the computer as an authority, and to think of the information, such as that accessed via the internet as the ‘truth’ (Gibson & McKay, 2001, pg). But the internet is not neutral, and truth is confined to the author presenting the information. A prime example of this is Wikipedia. Wikipedia is an informal information site used often by students and adults to gather information. Yet the site is maintained by individuals who add to it, and anyone with a username and password for the general site can add to it. So then those which view it, view the truth under the eye of the one who wrote it, taking the truth they read as the only truth. This is problematic because this information can be easily tampered with, and changed to suppress one viewpoint, while enhancing the viewpoint of another. Then generalizations and part-truths are continuously added to our repertoires of knowledge. Segall says (2003), “all maps embody their authors’ perspectives, assumptions, and biases,” and just like maps, the internet too has many different authors with various different tools to assert their viewpoints (Segall, 2003, pg. 149).

One viewpoint in particular which seems to rule is the westernized viewpoint. Guangrong says, “The internet explicitly propagates and implicitly spreads western democratic values” (Guangrong, 1998, pg. 2). From free forum sites, blogs, and single subject pages, American society promotes ideals of sexual promiscuity, core democratic values like freedom of speech and religion and ideals of what a civilized and uncivilized should look like. In doing so western ideals are measured against non-western ideals, and conveniently seems to come out on top. Guangrong further goes on to say that these websites allow individuals “to express one-sided views and cite examples that demonstrate the backwardness of China; other websites underestimate the abilities of Asian governments to control political situations and economic development” (Guangrong, 1998, pg. 2). Though the internet has the potential to push out a vast knowledge of cultures Kumari and Chandio (2004) have found that “the use of the internet has not greatly contributed to the understanding and adopting of other cultures” (Chandio & Kumari, 2004, pg. 158). It is the authorship behind the opinions and assertions found in documents on the internet that contributes to our generalizations and stereotypes. Those generalizations disable us.

The internet is problematic in numerous ways, from its unreliable “truths,” its promotion of western ideals, its ability to be tampered with, and our sole reliance on the internet. Though it has many benefits, we must be careful not to assume that it is unproblematic and unbiased. In being careful we must teach our children and adults to become socially aware of the biases, opinions, and half truths they can come in contact with while in cyber space. While giving them the skills they need to be able to read through and in-between artifacts of information they come in contact with. Whitworth and Berson (2003) “warn educators not to simply rely on internet filtering software, but to focus on teaching students critical thinking skills so that they can learn to make informed decisions and judgments about information they encounter on the internet” (Whitworth & Berson, 2003, pg.480). We must teach our students to become critical thinkers, to question the information

they come in contact with, to analyze it, and in doing so they will be much more equipped to handle the problematic sources they come in contact with online, and much more, the challenges they come in contact with throughout life. In addition, we must allow for opportunities within the classroom to have discussions regarding the internet and popular digital tools we use so often in our everyday lives. We must talk about the implications, the “unheard” voices represented in informational documents online, and give students opportunities to engage in moments where they can express their opinions, their concerns, and their personal experiences with the internet. In doing so we must not forget to educate our students about every culture. Over time our children will encounter a wealth of knowledge by which they will have to discern truth from and we must set the foundation in teaching about

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