

Margaret Chase Smith Library 2024 Essay Contest

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. The essay prompt for 2024 asked students to recommend guidelines that we should establish concerning teenagers' use of technology to ensure their personal safety and privacy. Essays have been edited for length.

FIRST-PLACE ESSAY

Legislate, Educate, Integrate: Three Steps to Help Teenagers Coexist with the Internet

by Summer LaRose

In under 20 years, we've gone from the commonplace of flip phones to the groundbreaking—albeit controversial—introduction of ChatGPT as a household name. Simply put, the technological sphere is expanding at a rate such that we all have whiplash; we have been unable to properly consider the consequences of technology's assimilation into every crevice in our lives and for Generations Alpha and Z, the additional consequences of having grown up during this period. Today, the effort to eradicate human error through artificial intelligence (AI) jeopardizes teenagers' safety and privacy. As a society, we must find a way to preserve our humanity in the face of these technological advancement and ultimately learn to coexist with its products. Instead of outright restricting screen time, guardians should advocate for legislation that protects teenagers from AI and their general security online, educate teenagers on digital literacy, and integrate AI into classrooms to enhance learning experiences.

San Diego University's Vernor Vinge eerily predicts our current dilemma in his 1993 NASA-sponsored

article, "The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era," in which he defines an upcoming "singularity" as "change comparable to the rise of human life on Earth. The precise cause of this change is the imminent creation by technology of entities with greater than human intelligence" (Vinge 1993: 12). In 2024, Vinge's prophecy has found fulfillment in AI chatbots; most objective knowledge is now at our fingertips. As the line between computer and human consciousness begins to blur, a former figment of 20th century science fiction emerges as a question of our 21st century reality: Can human equivalence be summed up in a superhumanly intelligent machine?

While the prospect of superhuman knowledge may sound exciting, fear dominates public opinion surrounding AI. According to the AI Policy Institute, over 80 percent of the American public is convinced that AI could cause a catastrophe by accident, and 77% feel that the US government should regulate AI more (Perrigo 2024). Indeed, the State Department's Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation is

considering whether AI should be added to the list of risks the department monitors for possible "weaponization risk," a scenario in which AI is used to design and execute cyber, biological, or chemical attacks, and "loss of control" risk, a scenario in which an AI system behaves belligerently to humans by default. Still, as Vinge points out, "we are the initiators [of the Singularity].... We have the freedom to establish initial conditions, make things happen in ways that are less inimical than others" (Vinge 1993: 16). If we as a society do not yield all control to Big Tech and its associates, there will be hope for humanity yet.

It follows then that the first step to ensure the safety of teenagers in the digital world is to enact a societal agreement to respect most human capabilities as irreplaceable by AI and advocate for such values in legislation. Fortunately, discussion surrounding AI policies is already underway. In a Senate Hearing on AI Regulation in October 2023, ideas ranged from the suggestion that the US government should focus on collaboration between government and scientists in evaluating the AI models for safety to the insistence that the US work with foreign governments to agree on an approach consistent with the European Union's AI Act, in which high-risk cases are more strictly regulated than less consequential ones (Meltzer 2023). Additionally, President Biden has put forth an executive order to require companies constructing the most advanced AI systems to perform safety tests and notify the government of the results before releasing their respective products (Lima-Strong and Zakrzewski 2023). Similar proposals are included in a blueprint for what the Biden administration is calling an "AI Bill of Rights,"

which aims to protect the American public's data and privacy and require tech companies to give users notice and explanation when AI is involved in a system (The White House 2022). We must stress to our legislatures that time is of the essence for these legal measures; AI-perpetrated harm is a legitimate threat now.

The second step towards turning teenagers into well-informed members of the digital society is implementing digital literacy lessons in classrooms across America to promote personal safety and privacy online. Broadly, digital literacy refers to the skills needed to exist in a society where communication and information occur through digital. As teenagers find sources of varying credibility and quality, their ability to apply critical thinking skills could improve with the following lessons: online news and advertising analyses, proper citations, and copyright policy. Privacy and security are also important aspects of digital literacy; instructing teenagers on the implications of their online footprints will render them less susceptible to illegal behaviors such as identity theft and cyberbullying (American University 2020).

The third step towards teenage safety and prosperity in the digital age is integrating AI in classrooms to advance academic achievement instead of shunning it unconditionally as a cheating machine. ChatGPT and other chatbots will only grow more sophisticated over time, so educators should take advantage of them as practical calculators for assignments in the humanities. Given its generative capabilities, AI has the potential to foster creativity and informed decision-making, among other career-savvy virtues (World Economic Forum 2024). For better or for worse, teenagers will need to know how to navigate AI tools so that they

may work alongside them when they graduate into the professional world. Therefore, they will require in-classroom experience to understand what the biases AI possesses and how AI can be misused (Roose 2023).

In the face of the apparent inevitability of AI domination, some may argue that social media and AI regulating laws are futile endeavors. This pessimistic is a broader symptom of the actualization of Vinge's Singularity: "ideas themselves should spread ever faster, and even the most radical will quickly become commonplace" (Vinge 1993: 14). "Radical" is a descriptor that does not just apply to technological developments; it can also look like radical social and legislative policy change. We must challenge the assumption that the digital sphere is too complicated for parents to understand and help their teens navigate. According to multiple studies of teens' mental health in the digital age, there is a lack of convincing evidence for the notion that the rise of the internet is the cause of teenage mental health struggles (Odgers and Jensen 2020). Parents and policymakers can instead use evidence-based strategies to support teenagers in the digital age. Conclusively, guardians must not merely restrict screen time; instead, they should advocate for AI regulating legislation, educate teenagers on digital literacy in classrooms, and integrate artificial intelligence into these classrooms to enhance learning. The posthuman era is rounding the corner, so we must raise today's humans accordingly.

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