

Happy 21st birthday!

TEXT A On the positive side

The size and importance of this technological revolution

The internet has reached people all over the world, on every continent. Last year Africa opened up to Broadband, so now this continent is also part of the great technological revolution. Many consider the internet to be the largest and most influential piece of technology since the invention of steam in the Industrial Revolution: the dramatic effect of the web on information-sharing is similar to the effect of steam on power-making.

The internet has no boundaries

Nowadays any internet user can connect with huge numbers of people and huge amounts of information at any time. Distance, geography and boundaries are insignificant because everyone is linked together, in one giant spider's web. People can study, work, shop, chat and even search for a partner from the comfort of their living room.

Access to information and equality

The internet gives everybody equal access to information. If you consider, for example, the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, about 65 million people use this site every month worldwide. This access is even more remarkable when you consider that it is free. Furthermore, the information can be given and added to by everyday users like yourself. In this way, users can therefore be *providers* of information too; knowledge can be given by the people themselves, not just by a small group of experts.

Empowering the people

The fact that this technological revolution can empower people has been shown in more extreme situations too. Social networking sites, blogging, and 'tweeting' mean that anybody can publish their views and opinions immediately. As a direct result, the younger generation is growing more political. In fact, Barack Obama relied heavily on various online media to help him win the presidency in 2008.

A tool for political change

The internet is also a tool to fight for democracy. Some governments have recognized the power and threat of the internet and at some points have tried to censor it, to block the spread of information.

Glossary for text A

access (noun) - the opportunity to have or to use something: *as a student at the university, you have access to the library*

censor (verb) - to take out parts of a book, film or letter, for political, religious or moral reasons

democracy (noun) - a system of government in which people choose their political representations in elections

empower (verb) - to give power and opportunity to someone in their work or life

provider (noun) - a company, person or group of people who give a service which is needed

rely [on sb/sth] (verb) - to need something in order to continue living or operating: *she relies on her mother to look after the children while she is at work*

revolution (noun) - the sudden or major change, especially in ideas or methods

steam (noun) - the hot wet substance that is produced when water is boiled, for example in a kettle; this substance can be used to produce power: *the steam train*

Reading eLesson

TEXT B On the negative side

Health and social development

Spending so much time in front of screens is potentially harmful for our health and social development. In Korea, over half of 3-5 year olds use the internet regularly, over eight hours per week. Standards of education are very high there, but the government is worried about the thousands of cases of internet addiction per year. Other countries may soon face the same problem.

Learning

Some people argue that providing such easy access to information makes people lazy and affects quality of understanding. University lecturers sometimes complain that their students no longer read books or process information fully; they have only a superficial knowledge of a subject.

Relationships

The internet allows us to connect with huge numbers of 'friends' on social networking sites; *Facebook* claims to have 350 million members. However, 'friends' on such sites are often more like strangers. Critics also worry about young people who feel the need to behave like celebrities, publicizing their private lives online.

Privacy and the future

The internet might actually limit our freedom: personal information is stored forever and cannot be erased. Putting personal details online about your political beliefs, for example, might negatively affect your job prospects later. Young people in particular, who live in a world where there is only a fine line between 'private' and 'public', often publicize their private lives without thinking of the consequences.

Privacy and advertising

Whenever we go online, data is collected about our eating, reading, spending habits, and so on. Our online shopping habits are monitored so that we can be sent specific adverts to match our shopping behaviour. Some free email providers also use tools to identify keywords in our private emails, to advertise related products directly to us. Some consider this to be an invasion of privacy.

The potential danger of the internet

Finally, the internet is an incredible information-sharing tool, but it may be harmful to society. Last month, a party was advertised on a social networking site, held at an empty house in London. According to organizers, over 5000 people turned up. When people started damaging the property, riot police had to be called. It is easy to imagine how other anti-government or terrorist groups can exploit the internet in much more serious ways.

Glossary for text B

addiction (*noun*) - a strong need to keep taking something such as drugs or to keep doing something which may be harmful to you

consequence (*noun*) - result or effect of something

affect (*verb*) - to change or influence something. If something affects something else, it **has an effect** on it: *the disease affects the trees, which eventually die.*

invasion of privacy (*phrase*) - when someone finds out or uses information about your private life, especially illegally: *asking a job applicant to put their age on a form is seen by some people as an invasion of privacy*

superficial (*adjective*) - not complete, deep or thorough

turn up (*verb*) - to arrive somewhere

Reading eLesson

1 How many hours a week do you spend ...

- ... reading and writing emails?
- ... reading or writing blogs?
- ... communicating with friends on Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, or other social networking sites?
- ... watching videos on sites such as YouTube?
- ... doing other things on the internet?

2 In your opinion, what are the positive and negative aspects of the internet? Make a list.

3 Read the introduction to a text on the explosion of the internet in our lives. Find the answers to the following:

- 1 How old is the internet, as we know it ?
- 2 Why is Tim Berners-Lee important in relation to this?
- 3 How many people are now online globally?

13th March was the 21st birthday of the World Wide Web. It was created by Professor Timothy Berners-Lee in 1989. The internet actually dates back originally to the 1960s, but at that time it was mainly limited to academic and military circles. Thanks to Berners-Lee, it moved into public use. Nowadays, it is estimated that about a quarter of the global population use the internet, so nearly 2 billion people are now online. In Britain alone, about 35 million people log on to the internet every day and in China 253 million people are online.

4 Your teacher will give you a text about either the positive or negative sides of the internet. Read your text and make notes to help you remember the main points.

5 Work in pairs. Take turns to tell each other about what you read, using your notes to help you. As your partner is talking, listen and add to your own notes.

6 Discuss the following with your partner:

- a Do you personally see the internet as a good or a bad thing and why? In your opinion, what is the greatest thing about it? And the most worrying aspect?
- b If you went to a place where the internet was not available, what would you find hardest to live without?
- c When you use the internet, do you still feel amazed by it, or do you use it without thinking?
- d Do you think social networking sites are just a fashion, and that the fashion will soon pass?
- e How will the internet change our lives in the future, say 20 years from now?