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Humans on the Internet: From Utopia to Dystopia

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has become an inseparable part of contemporary society. Few people today can imagine life without using various social media platforms. However, what does the Internet truly offer? The seemingly beautiful and utopian world presented through online photos and videos conceals a darker side. The dangers awaiting users who succumb too easily to this idealized vision can have serious real-life and legal consequences, ranging from data fraud, identity theft, and financial crimes to human trafficking and child exploitation. Online hate speech has also contributed to the psychological and social destruction of individuals who lacked the resources or strength to cope with it. This paper aims to address the question of whether the Internet poses a genuine threat to its users, or whether such concerns merely reflect a dystopian vision of human helplessness in the digital age.

Introduction

Social media has taken over the time of Internet users. The latest research conducted by NASK reveals that young people spend up to 6 hours daily using the Internet. Most of this time is spent doomscrolling through social media. Instagram is full of happy people promoting life in harmony with nature with plumped-up faces. Luxurious lifestyle, under the slogan „it is not about money, it's about relationships", attracts new users. However, the beautiful, utopian world presented in photos and videos on social media has its darker side. The dangers that await a user who is overly tempted by the utopian vision of the Internet may have serious consequences in both life and law. Starting from petty thefts, data fraud, identity theft, financial crimes, to kidnappings, human trafficking, and child pornography. The hate speech on the Internet has often led to the destruction of people who did not have enough strength to deal with it. The aim of this study is to demonstrate that using the Internet is a real threat to every user, and it is not just a dystopian vision of a helpless person.

Instagram and the other disasters

Instagram, one of the most popular social networking apps, was launched in 2010. To show the scale of the phenomenon, 25,000 people joined Instagram on the first day. users. Three months of the portal's operation were enough to gather a million users. Currently, approximately 800 million people worldwide use Instagram, with Poles accounting for around 6 million. The creators of Instagram intended to create a platform for users to communicate through photos. The application enables users to upload photos and short videos, and apply filters to enhance their appearance. With the development of social networking sites, users began to publish and view more and more colorized photos, and over time, the photos began to differ more and more from reality. Finally, by entering the Instagram application, users enter the utopian world of beautiful people constantly travelling to remote destinations, dining in exquisite restaurants. A world of happy, rich people who lack nothing. People whose work is their passion, and children who are polite and always happy. However, behind the beautiful faces smiling from Instagram photos, there are many dangers resulting from the imprudent use of social networking sites. The consequences may be of various types, ranging from life, social, and health to legal, which are of particular interest to this study.

When logging into Instagram for the first time, users are required to accept the platform's terms and conditions. The vast majority do not read them before giving consent, remaining unaware of the potential legal implications of their agreement. In the opening paragraphs of Instagram's Terms of Use, the platform states: "We do not claim ownership of your content, but you grant us a license to use it" (*Instagram Help Center*, n.d.-a). Although this statement appears to reassure users that the rights to their content remain with them, the

subsequent explanation clarifies that "when you share, post, or upload content covered by intellectual property rights (such as photos or videos) on or in connection with our Service, you grant us a non-exclusive, royalty-free, transferable, sublicensable, worldwide license to host, use, distribute, modify, run, copy, publicly perform or display, translate, and create derivative works of your content (consistent with your privacy and app settings)" (*Instagram Help Center*, n.d.-a). By publishing photos or videos on Instagram, users therefore grant the platform extensive rights to use their content, which may include their own image or the image of others appearing in the shared material. Such permissions can lead to significant legal consequences, especially concerning image rights and data protection.

Legal consequences of posting photos

First of all, a photo of a portal user may be used without the user's consent, e.g., by advertising agencies, which, by advertising various products, will generate revenue using the user's image, leaving them out of the financial distribution. Having no control over how someone uses a photo posted on Instagram, having no influence on whether the photo will be processed or promote products or services with which they do not identify.

A more serious consequence of publishing photos on the Internet is the theft of the user's identity. It is possible to use photos to create a profile that makes it more credible. Then, using such a fake profile, they commit other crimes, most often extorting further personal data and financial resources. Identity theft can be multifaceted and used in various ways. By obtaining the user's photos and basic personal data, the cybercriminal can then obtain more detailed information by impersonating the victim. The data obtained may be used to submit loan applications, facilitate financial fraud, and further compromise the data of the user's friends and relatives. The spiral created by the cybercriminal becomes increasingly intense as he continues to share precise information about a given user. Publishing photos, locations, and places of work, and tagging loved ones, may endanger not only the user but also the group of people who have relationships with him or her on Instagram.

To extort user data, cybercriminals often conduct phishing attacks. This action involves sending a message, creating the need for urgent action on the part of the user. Under time pressure, the user who is the target of an attack has little time to consider their decisions and actions, and ultimately acts under the influence of emotions. In this way, data is stolen, but phishing is also used to extort funds. To strengthen phishing, cybercriminals also use ransomware, i.e., malware that spreads when a user clicks on a malicious link. The software is blocked, and the user becomes a hostage until payment is made to the cybercriminal. Often, sensitive user data is shared by other users, making it easier for cybercriminals to engage in illicit activities. This phenomenon is described as doxxing and, next to hate speech, is the most popular form of cyberbullying.

A popular crime is a scam - a type of online fraud that aims to gain financial benefits by deceiving the victim into trusting them. Many online criminals exploit people's emotions, capitalizing on their compassion and willingness to help. The scammer usually comes up with a heartwarming story - for example, a sick child who urgently needs money for medicine or surgery. As evidence, the fraudster creates falsified bills for treatment, photos or requests for help from loved ones. Fake fundraising is most often conducted on social media, where users are motivated by the desire to help share a link to the website with their friends. Unfortunately, the money from the false collection goes to the fraudsters' account.

Considering that Instagram is a platform where users communicate primarily through photos and short videos, cybercriminals have adapted their operating techniques to exploit these visual media. With the growing use of artificial intelligence in everyday life, new threats have emerged for social media users. Cybercriminals now use AI to process photos, voices, and videos to obtain material for illicit purposes, such as creating deepfake content for extortion or fraud (Europol, 2023). Online fraudsters employ AI-generated material depicting the victim's likeness and voice to deceive the victim's relatives, claiming the person is in danger and requesting money. Other common methods include blackmail, where perpetrators threaten to release manipulated or fabricated intimate content unless a ransom is paid (Interpol, 2023). Such material is often distributed on adult websites or sent to family members or employers—a tactic known as the "boss scam" or "CEO fraud." These crimes are facilitated by

users' tendency to overshare personal images on social platforms, making it easy to identify and target partners, friends, or colleagues. Recent data show that only 49% of social media users verify the authenticity of profiles or messages they receive (Statista, 2024), which significantly increases the risk of victimization.

Consequences of posting children's photos

Photos posted on Instagram often depict children who may become victims of crimes by having their images shared. The common "phenomenon of sharenting" can be used in a similar way to the one indicated above, but it may have much more far-reaching consequences.

Sharenting and its extreme version of troll parenting involve sharing photos of one's own children online with varying intensity. When parents post photos or videos of their children, they often share not only beautiful moments, but also use mocking materials about, showing children in embarrassing situations, sometimes naked, crying, or even in situations that pose a threat to their health or life. Sharenting repeatedly humiliates the child and discredits the child in the eyes of the recipient. Therefore, the phenomenon of sharing is considered another form of cyberbullying. Based on what users who are parents post, cybercriminals have even greater opportunities to use the child's image.

There is a phenomenon called baby role play (also called digital kidnapping), which is a crime involving the use of a stolen image of a child to fulfil fantasies, including sexual or violent ones, by unknown people. The child's image downloaded from the Internet is placed on a specially created profile in social media, and the child is given a new name. The fake profile includes a description of their activities, likes and dislikes. The person sharing the child's image may play various roles, e.g. the child's parent. Other users can post and comment, building a usually sexual narrative around the initially neutral photo. There were over 55,000 photos shared on Instagram in 2015, tagged with #babyrp, #adoptionrp, and #orphantrp.

Publishing children's faces in their everyday environment allows unauthorized persons to locate the child. Many parents post photos from school, spend time watching their children's extra-curricular activities, and mark the hotels they travel to. This makes it easier for criminals to reach children. The Internet is also used for human trafficking, child pornography and deviations, which users often forget about. Social media users forget that a photo or video posted on Instagram has hidden data - metadata. Such information is hidden in EXIF files. EXIF – short for Exchangeable Image File Format – becomes part of the photo, which is written to a photo file by a digital camera or photo editing software. The EXIF standard was created by the Japan Electronics and Information Technology Industries Association (JEITA) and has been in effect since 1995. Most digital cameras and smartphones support it. The EXIF file contains a number of information about the photo, including: date of taking the photo, shutter speed when taking the photo, camera model, camera parameters (e.g. ISO sensitivity, aperture, focal length), exposure settings, resolution, photo orientation, image format, flash on/off, file size, thumbnail of the original frame, geolocation data if the photo was taken using a device with a GPS module (e.g. smartphones have it). This information is saved automatically in the photo file. When viewing photos, the EXIF data is invisible. It can be viewed using special software or the built-in photo viewer function. Metadata is used by cybercriminals to obtain a lot of information from one photo, which can help trace the person who took the photo and posted it on a social networking site. This is a simpler and legal solution compared to the actions described above. The mere fact of obtaining metadata from a photo does not constitute a crime. You don't have to delve into the darknet to fall victim to people who will do almost anything for money.

Hate speech in social media

A common threat that affects almost every Instagram user is hate speech. The development of the Internet, including the expansion of social networking sites, has enabled users to establish relationships and react to published photos quickly. It would be utopian to claim that all comments under photos and videos are positive, or that if they are negative, they constitute constructive criticism. The level of expression on the Internet is clearly decreasing, and users, feeling anonymous, cross the line of criticism and resort to hate. Hate speech lacks a specific definition in international human rights; it is a term used to describe broad discourse that is extremely negative and constitutes a threat to social harmony. According to the Committee of Ministers, hate speech is understood

as all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as "race", colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation. Along with the development of new forms of media, online hate speech has been brought about.

Research I conducted on a group of almost a thousand Instagram users shows that almost 70% of them have encountered hate speech on the Internet. In contrast, almost 60% of them have experienced hate speech personally. The respondents indicated that hate speech most often concerns their origins, appearance, and their activities both on the Internet and in everyday life. Hate hits the user, his psyche. Research conducted by NASK shows that more than two-thirds of young Internet users (68.4%) claim that hate speech is a problem on the Internet. There is an increasing feeling among teenagers that people who insult people on the Internet go unpunished. However, hate speech is a real threat to users of social media and may constitute many crimes, depending on the actual situation. Hate speech includes the following acts: defamation (Article 212 of the Penal Code), insult (Article 216 of the Penal Code), the threat of discrimination (Article 119 of the Penal Code), criminal threat (Art. 190 of the Penal Code), persistent harassment, so-called „stalking" (art. 190a of the Penal Code), forcing another person to take a specific action by threat (art. 191 of the Penal Code), false accusations (art. 234 of the Penal Code), inciting and praising a crime (art. 255 of the Penal Code), incitement to hatred based on national differences (art. 256 of the Penal Code), public insult due to national, ethnic, racial or religious affiliation or non-denomination (art. 257 of the Penal Code), malicious disturbance.

People who experience hate speech on the Internet often face exclusion in real life, and in extreme cases, this can lead to suicide. The spiral of threats is growing because, often chasing dreams of becoming someone else on the Internet and joining the utopian life of influencers, young people resort to risky behaviours that they would not do in real life. They create profiles on social media to present sexual content for profit. However, they do not see the threat that may appear soon, which is that such materials will eventually be seen by their family, friends, and coworkers. And explicit materials processed by AI may pose a real risk of destroying someone's future. This is not only a problem for adults, as there is no real age verification on social media, so children already have access to them. Some of them are voluntary profiles, but there are also profiles that exploit children by promoting child pornography.

Dangers on the Internet for young people

Young people face a full spectrum of online challenges, ranging from the fun and inconsiderate to those that pose dangers. Three out of ten teenagers admitted that in the last year, they took part in a challenge that could have put their own or other people's life or physical/mental health at risk. According to UNICEF research (The State of the World's Children 2021; On My Mind: promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health), conducted in 21 countries around the world, over 13 per cent of teenagers aged 10-19 are diagnosed with mental disorders. This is nearly 86 million young people aged 15-19 and 80 million aged 10-14. Among the reported ailments, anxiety and depression constitute the largest percentage (almost 40%) of all diagnosed disorders. If left untreated, in extreme cases, they can even lead to suicide. According to UNICEF, suicide is the fourth most common cause of death among teenagers, and on average, about 46,000 people take their lives each year. children aged 10–19. Research shows that every year, the number of users who have been subjected to hate and, as a result, struggle with depression is growing rapidly.

Conclusion

Instagram users often set themselves unrealistic goals while scrolling through the platform. They aspire to emulate the influencers they observe daily. They want luxury, wealth, happiness. About 40% of Instagram users use it to feel better. Observing utopian online life, users compare it with their real life, and this is where they hit a wall. Their lives, compared to the Internet world, no longer seem so happy and colorful. That often leads to self-doubt and depression. Combined with hate speech, Instagram's utopian vision turns into a dystopia. Freeing yourself from your tormentor in real life is much easier than on the Internet. The common slogan "The Internet does not forget" perfectly illustrates how long Internet crimes will remain in cyberspace along with

their victims.

Every day, an Instagram user forgets that a criminal world is operating next to them. A world of unscrupulous people who will use every opportunity to get rich. By unknowingly publishing their personal information on the Internet, users make it easier for fraudsters to operate. Users of social networking sites, flying like moths to the light, can get seriously burned or even lose their lives if they are not careful. Let the summary of this paper be a quote that perfectly illustrates the fine line between the conscious use of social networking sites and the threats posed by thoughtlessly posting content in cyberspace: we are just an unhappy generation with happy pictures on social media.

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