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Reading and Writing for the College Bound

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An Online Legacy

In today’s day and age it takes a lot of willpower to avoid going online at least once a day. Whether it's to see the latest news and trends or to check up on friends and family, the internet has become a vital part of everyday life. Every time someone goes online, all of their activity is compiled to create their own, unique digital footprint. With society’s dependence on technology growing stronger, it's no surprise to see that these digital identities are starting to affect their real life counterparts. From the moment a baby’s picture is posted, as they transition into adulthood, and well after they’re gone, a person’s digital footprint follows them throughout their lives and impacts their role in society.

Before a child can even use a computer, their digital footprint is created. As soon as a single baby picture is posted, that child’s image becomes a permanent part of the internet. Their face is no longer just theirs, it is part of the public domain and can be seen and used by anyone who is interested. In an article written by Carolyn Hax, she tries to calm the fears of an expecting family who does not want their newborn’s picture posted online. The parent’s concern for their child is not without reason, but Hax urges them to consider this question, “how likely is it that someone bad will zero in on your child’s image from among the random millions of images on Facebook alone, fix upon it and do harm” (Hax)? Let’s say these odds put the parent’s troubled mind to rest, they now believe that their child is protected from malicious intent. The family decides to let pictures of their kid to be shared on the internet. From that point on, the child has a digital footprint. They exist just as much in the digital world as they do the real one, but they don’t even know it. As this kid, and millions of their peers, grow up, they are taught that is perfectly normal to share information about themselves online. Without understanding the consequences of their actions, parents start to integrate their children into society at a very young age. Kids see their parents talking about their daily lives online and learn that that is what is expected of them. They see that people must document their lives in order to fit in. By the time these children get to high school, there is already going to be an extensive record of their lives that can impact their futures, especially once they start looking at colleges.

When prospective college students start to fill out their applications, they should be just as worried about their digital footprints as their GPAs. These students have spent most of their lives not only in school, but also on social media. While they probably worked hard to make sure their school record is squeaky clean, can the same be said about their online identity? According to the Kaplan Test, which questioned 381 colleges, “30 percent of the admissions officers said they had discovered information online that negatively affected an applicant's prospects.” That can be especially important for students who do not have the most competitive grades (Singer). What can be counted against students isn’t completely clear and neither is how far back colleges can look when considering eligibility. Is it fair for colleges to deny entrance based on something said, liked, or shared as a child? It’s hard to say, so to play it safe, many students across the country are cleaning up their social media and getting rid of anything they would be ashamed to show their parents. When and if a student is accepted, they need to realize that colleges are not the only ones that will place digital footprints under scrutiny. As people start to enter the workforce, they need to be aware that, “employers now vet the online reputations of job candidates as a matter of course” (Singer). People can quickly clean up their accounts when it really counts, but that is just treating the symptoms. Acting like a kind person online is one thing, being compassionate in real life is another. Whatever’s said on social media may not convey the writer's true personality, yet it will be how they are remember long after death.

Immortality has long be the stuff of legend, but now ordinary people are confronted with it. In a Ted Talk on digital footprints, Enriquez claims, “because of electronic tattoos, maybe all of you and all of us are very close to immortality, because these tattoos will live far longer than our bodies will” (Enriquez 3:03). Every experience, opinion, and picture that is posted can be view forever by anyone who cares to look. It can be scary to think about how this will affect the current generation of kids who have grow up on social media. Any mistake that is made, any embarrassing moment, and any dumb remark could impact how someone is viewed for years to come. This will cause many to try and avoid using posting anything online. The downside of that is, any acts of kindness or fond memories not recorded will eventually be eradicated as there is will be no one to remember them. After someone dies, their love ones will want a record of their life to remember them by. Instead of having to look through scrapbooks or read dusty diaries, children in the future will have an extensive record of almost every moment in their parents’, grandparents’, and even great grandparents’ lives. People have a choice to make, either live forever in the digital realm or be forgotten completely; it’s an overwhelming yet critical decision.

From birth to well beyond death, a digital footprint plays an important role throughout one’s life. While it’s nearly impossible to avoid creating a digital footprint, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. As long as it is used responsibly, the internet can house tons of great memories that can be shared with friends and family for years to come. Adults can look back on baby pictures and long for the days of their youth. Colleges can be inspired by a prospective student’s positive attitude and kindness. The smallest event is someone’s life could bring a smile to face of child decades from now. Everyone is responsible for their own digital footprint and must face any consequences that come from it, whether they be good or bad.

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