

Are Social Networking Sites Good for Our Society? A Critical Thinking Seminar with ProCon.org

Question and responses from ProCon.org: <http://socialnetworking.procon.org>

I. INTRODUCTION (15 minutes) – Who is ProCon.org? What is critical thinking? Vote on today's topic.

II. THE STATEMENTS (10-15 minutes) – Carefully read the two pro and two con statements, then read the three pro and three con arguments with these criteria in mind:

- Clarity** - Were the statements clear? Well stated? Easily understood? Scientific or emotional? How much do those things matter?
- Strength** - Did the person make a great point even if they did not articulate it well? Was the reasoning convincing? Was it logical? Did it just feel right in your heart?
- Source Quality** – Was the source an expert on the subject? Did the degree, title, location of publication influence your view of the source's expertise?
- Age** - Was the statement current? Did it seem relevant to the debate today? Was age even a factor in your view of the arguments made?
- Editing** - Was the presentation of information itself biased? Did the editing, length, relative strength of the sources, dates of the statements, or anything else suggest the presentation was not neutral?

<i>PRO - Social Networking Sites Are Good for Our Society</i>	<i>CON - Social Networking Sites Are Not Good for Our Society</i>
<p>PRO 1 - Nicole Ellison, PhD, Assistant Professor of Telecommunication, Information Studies, and Media at Michigan State University, stated the following in a Feb. 15, 2008 entry titled "Is MySpace Good for Society? A Freakonomics Quorum," from the Freakonomics blog hosted by the <i>New York Times</i>:</p> <p>"I believe the benefits provided by social network sites such as Facebook have made us better off as a society and as individuals, and that, as they continue to be adopted by more diverse populations, we will see an increase in their utility. Anecdotal evidence of positive outcomes from these technologies -- such as political activities organized via Facebook or jobs found through LinkedIn -- is well-known...</p> <p>Social technologies never have predictable and absolute positive or negative effects, which is why social scientists dread questions like these. In considering the effects of social network sites, it is clear that there are many challenges to work through -- the increasing commercialization of this space, the need to construct strong privacy protections for users, and safety issues -- but I believe the benefits we receive as a society provided by these tools far outweigh the risks."</p>	<p>CON 1 - Tom Hodgkinson, writer for the <i>Guardian</i>, stated the following in his Jan. 14, 2008 article titled "With Friends Like These....," published in the <i>Guardian</i>:</p> <p>"I despise Facebook. This enormously successful American business describes itself as 'a social utility that connects you with the people around you'. But hang on. Why on God's earth would I need a computer to connect with the people around me? Why should my relationships be mediated through the imagination of a bunch of supergeeks in California? What was wrong with the pub?</p> <p>And does Facebook really connect people? Doesn't it rather disconnect us, since instead of doing something enjoyable such as talking and eating and dancing and drinking with my friends, I am merely sending them little ungrammatical notes and amusing photos in cyberspace, while chained to my desk?...</p> <p>Clearly, Facebook is another uber-capitalist experiment: can you make money out of friendship? Can you create communities free of national boundaries -- and then sell Coca-Cola to them? Facebook is profoundly uncreative. It makes nothing at all. It simply mediates in relationships that were happening anyway."</p>
<p>PRO 2 - Kyung-Tag Lee, PhD, Professor of Management at Kyungpook National University (South Korea), et al., wrote in their June 10, 2013 study "Lonely People Are No Longer Lonely on Social Networking Sites: The Mediating Role of Self-Disclosure and Social Support," in the journal <i>Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking</i>:</p> <p>"SNSs [social networking sites] are used to facilitate studying, forming new relationships, maintaining preexisting personal ties, engaging in self-presentation, looking at photos and user profiles of other people, commenting on messages posted by others, avoiding boredom, passing the time, and procrastinating. These activities help individuals reduce loneliness and accumulate personal social capital, including emotional satisfaction, access to information, increasing one's well-being, and so on.</p> <p>...[W]hen people use SNSs, they tend to establish strong ties online, and strong ties support high quality friendships and social companionship, which ultimately enhance their well-being."</p>	<p>CON 2 - Susan Greenfield, DPhil, Professor of Pharmacology at the University of Oxford, stated the following in her Feb. 12, 2009 speech to the UK House of Lords:</p> <p>"Social networking sites might tap into the basic brain systems for delivering pleasurable experience. However, these experiences are devoid of cohesive narrative and long-term significance.</p> <p>As a consequence, the mid-21st century mind might almost be infantilised, characterised by short attention spans, sensationalism, inability to empathise and a shaky sense of identity."</p>

THREE PRO ARGUMENTS	THREE CON ARGUMENTS
1. Social networking sites spread information faster than any other media. 2. Law enforcement uses social networking sites to catch and prosecute criminals. 3. Social media allows for quick, easy dissemination of public health and safety information from reputable sources.	1. Social media enables the spread of unreliable and false information. 2. Social networking sites lack privacy and expose users to government and corporate intrusions. 3. Social networking site users are vulnerable to security attacks such as hacking, identity theft, and viruses.

III. SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION A (15 minutes) – Form into groups of 5 and discuss what you think of the statements considering the evaluation criteria in II above. Which side won? What questions do you still have?

IV. SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION B (15 minutes) – As a group, come up with your three best pro and three best con arguments. Consider many pros and cons, but come to a consensus on your best three. Make each argument distinct.

IV. ENTIRE GROUP DISCUSSION (20 minutes) – Back to normal seating. Small group work is over. Now, as one entire group, let's talk about the statements first using the five evaluation criteria.

V. INDEPENDENT SCORING SESSION (5 minutes) –Take a few minutes to reflect quietly on everything you've considered and give each pro and con statement a score of 1-5 using the criteria listed below.

[5 = outstanding, 4 = very good, 3= okay, 2= not impressed, 1 = terrible]

	PRO #1	PRO #2	CON #1	CON #2
a. Clarity of Statement	_____	_____	_____	_____
b. Quality of Source	_____	_____	_____	_____
c. Age of Statement	_____	_____	_____	_____
d. Editing of Statement	_____	_____	_____	_____
e. Strength of Argument	_____	_____	_____	_____
f. Subtotals #1	_____	#2 _____	Subtotals #1 _____	#2 _____
TOTAL OF PRO #1 and #2	_____		TOTAL OF CON #1 and #2	_____

VI. PRO AND CON ARGUMENTS – THE BIG LIST (20 minutes)
 Let's hear your top pro and con arguments. We'll type them out and show them on the big screen. How many can we get? Let's see what the arguments and support are on ProCon.org.

VII. FINAL VOTE (5 minutes) – You have read expert statements, analyzed and discussed them in small groups and a large group, brainstormed pro/con arguments, read more arguments and supporting evidence, and now you know more than 95% of the public on this topic, so let's vote again. Are social networking sites good for our society? Are you pro, con, or

VI. WRAP UP (5 minutes) – Time, Money, and Bias in Media Production; Why Critical Thinking Is Important; Keep in Touch with ProCon.org on Facebook, Twitter, Email; Free Stuff Up Front, Come and Say Hello.