EDITORIAL

December 22, 2020 Online at www.proedtn.org

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ALARM BELLS RINGING ON EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY

SUMMARY

As more and more teachers and students are forced to employ online education, it is critical that we safeguard the beneficial aspects of technology while protecting individual privacy.

The 2020 Netflix movie, ***The Social Dilemma,*** explores the growth of social media and the damage it has caused to society. It features interviews with many former executives and professionals from tech companies and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Apple who sounded the alarm on their industry.

The Social Dilemma asserts that tech companies exploit and manipulate their users for financial gain through surveillance capitalism and data mining. The movie is very thought-provoking and chillingly points out: "Never before have a handful of tech designers had such control over the way billions of us think, act, and live our lives." It goes into depth on how social media's design is meant to nurture an addiction, manipulate its use in politics, and spread conspiracy theories. *The Social Dilemma* paints the picture of a dangerous human impact on society and the serious issue of social media's effect on mental health (including the mental health of adolescents and rising teen suicide rates).

In public education, online instruction is inferior to effective in-person instruction. Our fear is especially heightened with the younger students. Frank Ghinassi from Rutgers University suggested in *USA Today* that children most harmed being online "are those who were already disadvantaged by food or housing instability, domestic violence, unsafe neighborhoods, fragmented families or absent role models." Yet, millions of students are now learning online, including thousands of students here in Tennessee.

Spiros Protopsaltis and Sandy Baum, both professors at George Mason University, issued a report observing that, "Students in online education, and in particular underprepared and disadvantaged students, underperform and on average, experience poor outcomes," and that online education, "does not produce a positive return on investment." Although like the authors, we share their optimism that technology has the potential to increase access to education, enhance learning experiences, and reduce the cost of providing high-quality education, in-person instruction will always be the preferred manner of instruction, especially for younger children.

We need more time and better evidence, including looking at best practices, before further implementation and expansion. The Center for Humane Technology suggests: "Exposure to unrestrained levels of digital technology can have serious long-term consequences for children's development, creating permanent changes in brain structure that impact how children will think, feel, and act throughout their lives." Due to COVID-19, and the rush to keep student instruction going, the process was rushed into existence---a forced

necessity. In our haste to meet this need, the economics of scale, scope, and action could end up creating many unexpected consequences of not being properly scrutinized or implemented properly.

Educators have had to build the plane while flying it, with online K12 instruction. They should be commended and rewarded for their efforts. Standard implementation processes and systems were not followed. We need to analyze what went well and what went wrong---with the systems and the processes. We especially need to strengthen privacy laws and limit data collection, as well as addressing issues such as digital manipulation and boundaries of responsibility for algorithmic fairness.

In public education we should ask if there is a correlation between rising concerns with social media and untested statewide online education? Will the next Netflix movie be sounding alarms on a dilemma with online education, or perhaps a dilemma that teachers themselves face in a virtual environment?

Overzealous data mining causes serious confidence in public education and creates privacy concerns if individual student data is compromised. Has anyone asked serious questions about what the contracts look like between those providing online education and the districts or state? What data is being collected? Schools have always collected data, but that information has been largely protected or ignored. That is now likely to change, and educational data will be captured, mined, and possibly manipulated.

Tristan Harris, featured in ***The Social Dilemma***, writes in the New York Times: "Simply put, technology has outmatched our brains, diminishing our capacity to address the world's most pressing challenges." If Harris is as correct as he is persuasive, we have the "power to reverse these trends." Will we exercise that power? How can we safeguard the beneficial aspects of technology while protecting individual privacy? We likely need additional policies and legislation to control and minimize the risks and propose necessary protections that empower the users of technology.

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