The Effect of the Internet on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

“The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity does not understand, the largest experiment in Anarchy that we have ever had.” - Eric Schmidt

The philosophy and effect of Anarchy is that of a boundless and striking one. Anarchy in society bears the ability to tear at the seams of its structure and bring humanity down to its very basic needs. Anarchy dissolves political power and government, and can leave authority or even hegemony in the hands of the dominant human. It is true to be said, (as I quote Eric Schmidt, former chief executive of Google Inc.) that the Internet, like the same society under Anarchy, is an open society of no publicly enforced government or violently enforced political authority. However, unlike an anarchic civilisation, the Internet, viewed from the perspective of a society, is equipped with the congenital infrastructure which would take a government decades to manifest almost inherently. Examples like communication and transportation (of data) are essentials that allow humanity to thrive and prosper to fulfil their basic and complex needs.

So strikes the question: How have our needs been augmented due to the inception of the Internet?

The general consensus is that most technology only exists because it augments what would normally be done by people. Seeing as the Internet wears similarities and differences with the ethos of an anarchic society, it is interesting to assess how humanity's needs have changed due to its influence. The most apt of references for the sake of comparison is that of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (HoN), a paradigm model used to depict the psychological maturity levels of humans through the satisfaction of progressive needs.

The first tier of Maslow’s HoN establishes the Physiological aspects of Human needs. Contrary to initial presumptions, there is mounting evidence on the Internet's effect on needs of a biological description, specifically that of Homeostasis. This covers preventing disease and promoting health online.

The Internet holds considerable promise in the early detection and treatment of chronic diseases through the supply of information regarding diagnosis, prevention, and treatment. By combining the attributes of interpersonal and mass communication, the Internet represents an important medium to disseminate this information. 52% of health content sought by adults online is Disease Information, followed by Diet and Nutrition and Pharmaceuticals. This information can be found from sources such as health forums, blogs, and publications which have increased the efficacy of patient care by enabling instant and collaborative communication in a virtual global community. The accessibility of this information can increase “patient power” which will help to cut health care costs by reducing the number of doctor visits for minor maladies that can be self-diagnosed and treated at home using the internet. This thereby changes how we assess our physiological needs, seeing as countless sources of self-aid are available with virtually little effort,
satisfying this need without acquisition.

However, despite the enthusiasm and the Internet’s capability to improve health, a number of challenges exist including defining the roles and responsibilities of patient/provider relationships. If the environment in which this information is delivered is by any means unreliable or unsuitable it could have detrimental or even fatal consequences on users. Many users seek information from non-professional online sources such as chat rooms and peer-led support groups, which increases the chance of obtaining false, inaccurate, or misleading information. Perhaps special training and licensing should be imposed for these sources. Along with the abundance of counterfeit pharmaceuticals and sites dedicated to the manifestation of illicit recreational drugs, these candid examples of health threats online make it impossible to ignore.

Not only do these challenges deteriorate and potentially make our physiological needs more difficult to satisfy, but privacy issues can greatly corrupt Tier 4 of the HoN, involving Safety and Security of body and health. Online health users can be quite willing to divulge sensitive information to a web site on a whim, endangering personal privacy and effecting users’ sense and need of security.

All inclusive, it is clear that the two largest tiers of Maslow’s HoN (Physiological & Safety) have been augmented by the inception of the Internet in a general context; our most basic needs having their accessibility and convenience escalated while exposing some minor but fundamental challenges.

As we progress through the Tiers of Maslow’s HoN, the augmentations become more intricate and chronic as we delve into the more psychological aspects of the effect of the Internet.

Social Anarchism as a philosophy sees individual freedom as being dependent upon mutual aid. From the perspective of the Internet, it shares this idea of Mutual Aid along with its other aesthetics of Anarchism. It seems capable of inducing benefit regarding the Belonging, Esteem, and partially the Self-Actualization tiers of the HoN.

The Internet is a haven of social support, not only among conventional social networks (in which ones close circle of friends would congregate i.e Facebook), but particularly amidst less prevalent mediums such as Community Forums, Niche Chat-Rooms, and other particular interest platforms. Storm A. King and Stephan T. Poulos in their work “CyberPsychology & Behaviour” show how the Internet can be used to aid issues with self-esteem, confidence as well as the aspect of Belonging. They apply this idea upon adults and adolescents with Generalized Social Phobia and Avoidant Personality Disorder. It is explained how subjects with this disorder may be slow or completely avoidant of social situations. The concept of utilising the Internet as an outlet of social contact as an entry level is studied and applied. A following case study explains how when a therapist encourages a patient to interact with others online, or the subject finds an interest in communicating through online self-help groups, it may constitute a distinct new and unstudied form of Exposure Therapy. Exposure Therapy is designed to reverse the normal social conditioning by pairing the anxiety-producing stimuli with a non-threatening response. Thus, subjects appear more likely to accept referral to these groups through the medium of the Internet. This may be due to the fact that the medium allows for social interaction without any social presence.

The mutual aid of others seems to have the effect of augmenting a person’s means of socialising, and effectively helps self-esteem and confidence. In the case of these
subjects, it hopes to eventually give them the confidence to partake in general social situations.

Though these developments of belonging give amazing credit to the Internet’s capabilities, it is not without its faults.

The subject of Internet “Addiction” is subjective, though the concept of it is a stark and unfortunately relevant one. Specifically in the case of the aforementioned subjects, over-exposure to the safety of the Internet could actually alter and reverse the desired effects of therapy. Becoming reliant or over-exposed on the Internet can result in mental and physical health issues. This is consistent with everyone, not just the stated subjects. Regarding the Belonging tier of the HoN, and concerning the possibility of subsequent social isolation from excessive Internet usage, Sexual Intimacy would be assessed naturally. This seems related to the 15% of all Internet traffic being explicit material, and the increase of “Net Relationships” in many cases. Regrettably, the outlet of “social interaction without any social presence” is akin with the idea of being “intimate without the risk”. Anonymity is another factor which feeds into this immensely. Not only does anonymity not have any potential risk, but it also does not have any potential consequence. This has resulted in the development of “subcultures” that welcome the ability to talk freely about illicit practices and value the freedom from oversight. For example, thousands of websites exist where individuals can learn how to grow marijuana, pass drug tests, buy paraphernalia and in some cases the drug itself.

On the subject of the drug market online, it is not only the illicit side that bears serious dangers. Purchasing prescription drugs online is possible, extremely easy and incredibly dangerous. Between prescription drug abuse, unreliable sources, and the recordings of related deaths, there is no debate about the hazard involved.

All these things considered, it seems that the Internet can also have a detrimental effect on the Esteem, Belonging, and in effect, the Safety tier of Maslow’s HoN. It also has suspect relativities with the hazards of Anarchism.

The Internet has significantly influenced the way that information is communicated. In addition to offering innovative ways to present and disseminate content, it creates an environment for instant transmission and interaction on a global level. The Internet is haven of creativity, problem solving, and the dissemination of facts. This fact gives great hope in its potential, as this shows that the Internet, as a society, has reached Self-Actualization: the pinnacle of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and proof of its ability to satisfy human needs. However, it is not without its maladies. The Internet’s augmentations on human needs are clear, though they are not all irrefutable. The unique Society of Anarchy that is the Internet is erupting with potential to be the most advanced society ever conceived. If the society we live in currently can embrace its potential, respect its integrity, and appreciate its risks of misuse, it could be the most efficient tool of satisfying human needs ever fathomed.
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