

## THE DARK SIDE OF THE INTERNET AND THE ONTOLOGICAL SENSE OF SAFETY

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**Purpose:** The purpose of writing this article was to argue that surfing dark, often unencrypted websites on the Internet disturbs their users' ontological sense of security. These sites, which only appear to be user-friendly on the surface, hide dark and dangerous content, the viewing of which often disturbs the value system, which may manifest itself in the destruction of personality, or in extreme cases, undermine the sense of human being.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The primary method of the research was a critical analysis of dark content and Internet content exemplifying the dark net. The main method was accompanied by a case-study method of selected websites, e.g. JBZD, which provides videos with hard content in addition to other, also educational, content. This is a very popular website among young people on the Polish Internet, which includes the hashtag "hard" with the help of suggested bookmarks.

**Findings:** Watching films saturated with brutality, frequently seeing scenes of death, inflicted in the most cruel way, has a destructive effect on a person. Frequent exposure to the dark part of the Internet, commonly known as the dark web, may contribute to the breakdown of the hierarchy of needs and, as a result, to the disintegration of personality, especially in children and adolescents, as it gives rise to states of apathy, atrophy of feelings and meaning.

**Originality/value:** The novelty of the article manifests itself in the selection of the research topic, which has not yet been subject to a thorough comprehensive analysis, especially from the perspective of the ontological sense of security of youth.

**Keywords:** Dark Web, Internet, virtual reality, online safety, ontological sense of safety.

### 1. Introduction

Analysing the issue of the influence of the Internet on the life of modern man, today, after many years of using this interactive technological medium of the information age, one can boldly risk the thesis that the life of modern man has been dominated by this relatively new space, of human existence, commonly referred to as virtual space, global network, digital world, cyber world, cyberspace, etc.

Virtual reality, is often equated with cyberspace. The term *cyberspace*, as it is known, is derived from the words *cybernetics* and *space* and was popularised by William Gibson, a Canadian writer who used the term in his 1984 debut *science fiction* novel *Neuromancer*. Our present-day, technology-saturated everyday life has been created according to a recipe originally contained in a visionary literary work. It is significant that, once again, a literary, technological metaphor has proved to be a harbinger of a future reality.

Today almost all of us agree, that the internet has completely changed our way of being, communicating, working, spending our free time, liking, passion, and our relationships with loved ones. To put it bluntly, virtual reality (VR) has radically and irrevocably changed our habits, customs, behaviour, routines, in a word, our previous way of being and living. The virtual world tempts us with a vast array of possibilities, so more and more of our activities are being transferred to this space. This is where we can be who we want to be. "If virtual reality works as it should, it is no different from the real world and changes as it does. There are no interfaces, gadgets or pixels. One minute you're putting an HMD<sup>1</sup> on your head and the next you're already in a completely different place. The feeling of 'being in a particular place' (regardless of where the programme you are running takes you) is called psychological presence by researchers and is a key characteristic of VR" (Bailenson, 2018).

On the Internet, it is possible to participate in a wide variety of computer games, distinguished by type - with regard to the aim of the game and the means of achieving it - and by genre - according to the perspective of the world presented in them, the time form of the game, the degree of imitation of the real world and the subject matter. They create virtually unlimited possibilities for the projection of vast virtual worlds, open to simulated, dynamic peregrinations. "The Internet, unlike traditional media, co-creates other new dimensions of reality, redefining the human way of thinking about space and what people consider real and viable. There is a strong belief in society that cyberspace compresses time and space like no other medium. The Internet is proving in many aspects of social life that it deserves to be called an expanded social space" (Kuzior, Janczyk, 2016).

Functioning in virtual reality, apart from its obvious, unquestionable benefits, unfortunately at the same time robs humankind of a sense of intimacy, a certain - but advisable - dose of mystery in relations, a sense of privacy, autonomy, truthfulness, freedom. Another result, extremely important from the perspective of the ontological sense of safety, is the lack of willingness and time to reflect on the purpose and meaning of existence in the world and finding one's own place in it. The problem of the atrophy of meaning particularly affects young people, who exist "in this world almost literally: without leaving home, thanks to which they get to know other worlds, as well as themselves. It is not clear whether the metaphor of the window, which was once invoked in relation to television and is now sometimes invoked in relation to

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<sup>1</sup> HMD (Head Mounted Display) is a type of computer display device, that is put on the head and can handle stereoscopic 3D images generated by a computer.

the Internet, is accurate here. Either way, the Internet is a window through which one looks at the world and a window - the world that one looks at" (Golka, 2008).

Virtual reality, as a new dimension of modern reality, is vast, with many dimensions, countless worlds that we as adults would not always want to find ourselves in, so we would even less want our children to get lost in the nooks and crannies of this boundless abyss. The authors of 'Inside the Dark Web' argue, that in fact, the part of the web that we 'surf' is small, as it represents only a tiny percentage of the virtual space: "Search engines like google provide access to freely available content which is 03% of the Internet" (Ozkaya, Islam, 2019). However, a variety of threats lurk in this percentage-poor commercialised and censored space, a seemingly 'safe' sphere.

## **2. The (un)hidden side of the Internet**

The space of the Internet - the World Wide Web, which was described in his memoirs by Timothy Berners-Lee, a British physicist and computer scientist, and is now known as the Internet - has dominated our daily lives to such an extent that, in fact, already today, it is not so much difficult for us to function without access to the Internet, but is slowly becoming simply impossible. Thanks to the rapid proliferation of satellite television, mobile telephony and the Internet, this network has encompassed almost our entire world and "is now a key element of our daily life, economy and safety" (Harari, 2017).

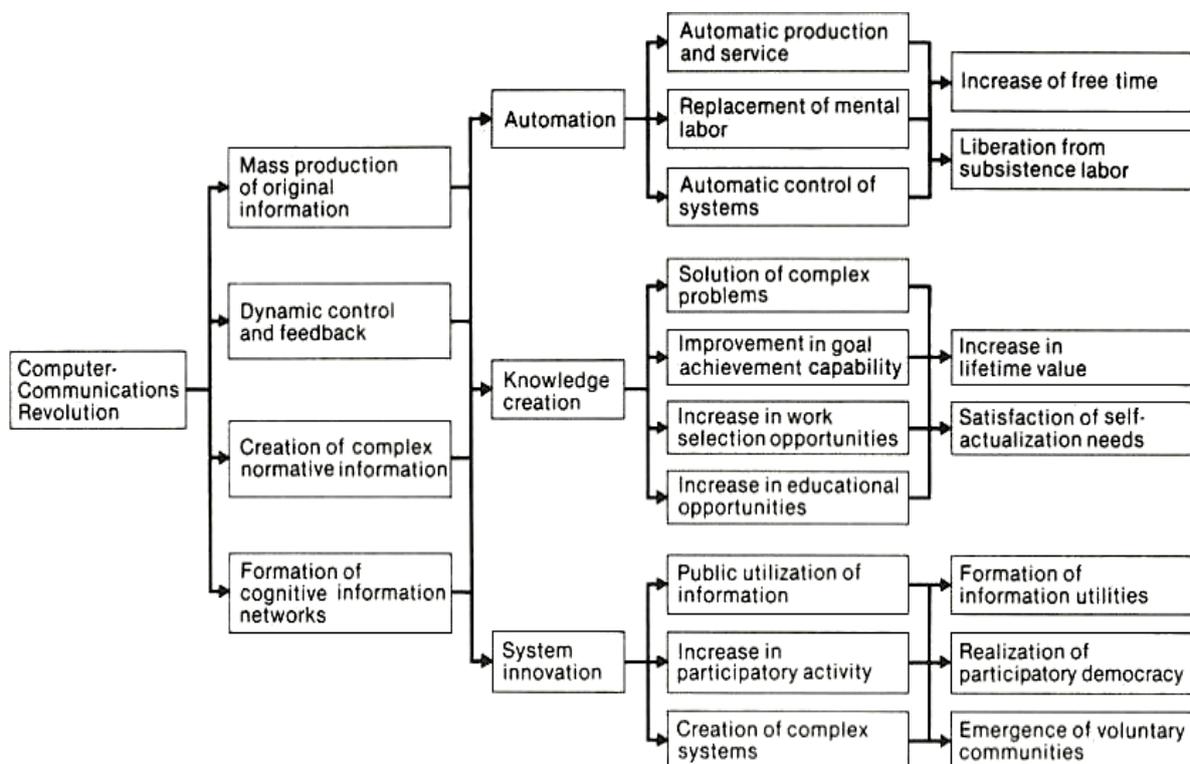
Increasing access to the digital world, which is the basis of the information society, as described by Japanese sociologist Tadeo Umesamo in 1963, is forcing contemporary people to take advantage of the possibility to exchange information on a global scale. The term "information society" refers to highly developed societies, which owe their prosperity, in almost all spheres of life, primarily to information, which, thanks to information technology, (mainly through the Internet) is the driving force behind the global development of these countries.

The theory concerning the role of information in the area of the economic structures of the state, which was undoubtedly supported by the process of globalisation, was continued in the late 1970s and early 1980s by, among others, Yoneji Masuda, who developed a comprehensive plan for the transformation of all spheres of life, which is likely to be realised in the information age. In his plan, Masuda envisaged the development of societies through the creation of a shared global space that would enable citizens to fulfil their needs in almost every area of human existence. "This global futurisation society will be a society in which everyone pursues the possibilities of one's own future, actualising one's own self futurisation needs by acting in a goal-oriented way. It will be global, in which multi-centered voluntary communities of citizens participating voluntarily in shared goals and ideas flourish simultaneously throughout the world" (Masuda, 1981).

In his book Masuda presents a visionary wholly new long-term vision for the 21st century, which he calls *Computopia*, that is, a world dominated by computers which, being networked, will become a force for social change, powerful enough to lead to the transformation of society into an entirely new type of human society, the information society. According to Masuda, this innovative technology of the 21st century will change social and economic systems in three successive stages. "The three stages of technological innovation, as they apply to the revolution in computer and communications technology, may be defined as replacement and amplification of the mental labour of man and the transformation of human society. This may be defined as follows:

- The first stage is automation, in which man's mental labour is includingly accomplished through the application of computer-communications technology.
- The second stage is that of knowledge creation, which entails the amplification of man's mental labour.
- The third stage is that of system innovation, a set of political, social and economic transformations resulting from the impact of the first two developmental stages"(Masuda, 1981).

The above-described three stages of the information epoch and its social consequences are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Computer-communications technology Revolution and Its Social Impact (Masuda, 1981).

The social changes taking place in the context of the development of the information and telecommunications sector and computerisation were to become the information society, initially only in Japan, and then, gradually implemented by all people in the world, both socially and individually. Masuda's concept was fundamentally guided by the same positive goals, i.e.: defence of states, socio-economic development, space exploration, social welfare, universal access to education, information, social welfare, contentment, national prestige, in a word, a comprehensive solution to the problems that most societies in the world face on a daily basis.

Meanwhile, this information age of great opportunity has spawned unimaginable dangers, with the "technical means generated allowing crime to develop on an unprecedented scale. In particular, money laundering, illegal speculation and many other ways of breaking the law using information technology create a threat hitherto unrecorded. From today's perspective, we can add to this a whole list of other acts of lawlessness, such as the stealing of information from computer systems, terrorism using the Internet and mobile telephony, etc." (Wielecki, 2012).

The wide gates of the Internet - have opened their doors to the dark side of human activity, providing unlimited opportunities to realise the darkest desires hidden from the light, the equally dark implications of which are usually shrouded in a heavy veil of universal silence. This space, like the dark side of the moon, hides under the name of the Dark Web.

### **2.1. Sites with violent content**

In the absence of real physical threats and the resulting apparent sense of safety and comfort, an increasing number of users of all ages are fearlessly immersing themselves in the virtual world, often drowning in a deluge of information, often saturated with violent content, often conveyed in a dispassionate manner. The brutalisation of life, with which the Internet is saturated, combined with the anonymity and thoughtlessness of Internet users, is increasingly becoming the natural perspective of reality, becoming the norm, robbing young people of their sense of purpose and sensitivity to the injustice of others, and depriving them of the chance for deeper reflection.

Not so long ago, certain areas of the Internet were intended for users over the age of 18 and were not generally accessible, censorship was in place, so, for example, erotic and pornographic content was not accessible to children, and informed parents could apply the so-called age restriction option, thanks to which the proposed material was adapted to the age of the users. Some areas of the Internet could be accessed using appropriate browsers, which were difficult

to access at the time, programmes (e.g. VPN<sup>2</sup>) which changed the IP<sup>3</sup>, i.e. the address from which the user usually connects.

Today, the situation has changed dramatically. A lot of content that until recently was reserved for adults and was censored is now easily accessible. These sites do not verify age in a way that protects their access for underage users. By simply entering a date (it is often possible to click on a date already entered), users can quickly and easily access a part of the Internet that has been labelled dangerous cyberspace. It is precisely the access to sites with so-called non-age-appropriate content that can threaten the ontological sense of safety, especially of those users who are entering adolescence.

These days, the lower age limit for young people to start sexual intercourse is decreasing. One only has to look into the browsing history of many 12- to 15-year-olds to easily see this fact. Adolescents, who in many cases have already had sexual initiation, acquire this knowledge based on content obtained from the Internet. Unfortunately, the content they find on the Internet is often saturated with brutalisation and instrumental treatment of the partner, which not only distorts the concept of love, but above all threatens the formation of healthy partnerships. It is true that in schools, there is a subject called LSW (knowledge for life), but the content concerning erotica and sex is often inadequate to reality, moreover it is discussed in later stages of education and is often outdated and therefore not very interesting.

In addition, the use of these sites poses certain risks, since they are often frequented by paedophiles who seek out minors and try to obtain photographs or other important information in order to meet, date and cruelly harm them. Perhaps this problem is already obvious, as there are widespread campaigns to make both children and parents aware of the dangers and of the aspects to which parents should pay attention when talking to their children.

## **2.2. Sites with the violent content**

Increasingly, psychologists and sociologists are speaking out about games, which generate a multitude of dangers in children and young people, in the form of aggression and the brutalisation of life. However, against the background of the dangers and all the evil hiding in the Internet, this is only a small percentage of the cause of aggression among young people. Another online danger is hegemony, stalking and bullying, which are the order of the day among the Internet community, whether in social media or in the area of so-called entertainment in the form of online games. However, the greatest danger lies in cyberspace, which is

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<sup>2</sup> VPN - virtual private network, a VPN is virtual, i.e. it exists in space and allows you to connect from a virtual IP address. On the network, the user leaves many traces, in the form of information about themselves, i.e.: the browser used, the broadcast address, the town, and sometimes the physical address to the nearest few metres, etc. The use of VPNs is intended to increase online safety. Every Internet user should have knowledge of - at least - the basic rules of Internet use, in order to protect themselves from dangerous contacts, viruses, tracking programmes, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Changing the IP address helps to hide our location and thus protects us from being tracked by, for example, an internet service provider.

increasingly dark and dangerous, even though on the surface it may appear to be a completely risk-free space.

This brings us to meme portals, which are popular with a wide range of Internet users, especially young people, i.e. short films, photos and images that Internet users visit to amuse themselves and improve their mood. Users of these sites create memes, then comment on them, evaluate them, thus forming a kind of specific community that stimulates each other. No account is required to view the content posted there. Most often popular events, situations, from the area of politics, sport, culture, advertising spots, etc., are presented in the form of memes, which, thanks to the frequency of their display, become viral (read: popular on the Internet). It would seem that meme sites should not generate negative emotions among children and young people, so it is not surprising that parents do not perceive any danger for their children in these seemingly humorous portals. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Just a few years ago, hard-content websites were only a topic of conversation among teenagers, who unsuccessfully tried to break ciphers and all sorts of Internet barriers to be able to access them, but today, during school breaks, children and young people already browse the popular JBZD website every day, which makes hard-content films available in addition to other, also educational, content. It is a very popular site on the Polish Internet with a name that, using hashtags (words that categorise topics, e.g.: knowledge, humour, politics, films, games, sports, hobbies, trivia, etc.), redirects users to topics of interest. New posts go to a so-called 'waiting' board, a category of new memes that can be commented on, and those that are rated the highest are moved by the administrators to the 'home page', thus becoming known as the best memes, So where is the danger here?

Well, the danger lies a little deeper, because on this seemingly innocent page, among the proposed tabs is the hashtag "hard". Admittedly, in order to access these tabs, an account is required, which is subject to an age limit of 18, which in most European countries is legally the same as the age of majority. However, this safeguard is infantile and easy to circumvent. All you have to do is create an account, confirm your e-mail address, enter your date of birth (you can enter any date, as no proof of identity is required) and from then on, without any restrictions, you can start exploring the dark corners of reality via the Internet. In the "hard" section, there are videos showing extremely violent content, in which, for example, ISIS executes people by shooting, slitting throats, raping and massacring. When, for example, people are cut, bones, veins, muscle fibres are visible. These scenes are accompanied by the unimaginable screams of the victims who meet this fate. It is enough to imagine that a 10-year-old boy, after finishing his lessons, browsing through funny memes, driven by curiosity, decided to dive into the depths of the Internet, sets up an account on the 'JBZD' portal to go deeper, then clicks on the hard tab, where he watches the drastic scenes without any censorship.

The content pages mentioned above are very popular with many internet users, especially young people, and there are many more portals similar to JBZD, e.g. Sadistic offers very similar content categories. However, with the exception that on Sadistic, the content is top-down and

concerning "hard" topics. Young people are usually curious by nature and unreflectively reach for such content, hence sadistic or JBZD-type portals are very popular in schools and spread extremely quickly. The danger of using such sites, especially with children and adolescents who have not yet crystallised axonormative rules for interpersonal behaviour, is that the system of values, goals and aspirations is disturbed.

As a kind of curiosity, it should be considered that during a certain period of activity of the JBZD portal there was a help action for one of its users. This action was the JBZD administrators' response to the father's post - in which he asks for financial support to treat his sick daughter. Surprisingly, the required amount was raised in a very short period of time. This is perhaps the only one of the positive sides to the story of this portal.

### **2.3. Dark Web - the descent into the underworld...**

The biggest concern at the moment is violence and the realisation that young people are being deprived by the violent behaviour they regularly see online. As we delve down the rabbit hole we are slowly reaching an increasingly dark area, usually the hidden part of the internet, also known as the *Dark Web darknet, deep web* etc<sup>4</sup>. This inaccessible space, inaccessible to the average user, is the darkest corner of the dark site of the web, which cannot be accessed by accident, as special software is required to get there. The most widely used network is TOR. "The URL of these sites is usually made up of a string of sixteen apparently random letters and numbers that end in '.onion' instead of any of the usual domain identifiers such as .com or .org. Because the sites are not designed to be found by search engines, users must either know the exact URL they want or use one of the available gateway sites. Any site that has an .onion domain name is contained within the Tor network and is not part of the internet. The hidden network of sites is colloquially referred to as Onionland" (Ormsby, 2018). This is a very dangerous area of the Internet, where people are able to get their hands on absolutely everything, from music files and commercial movies, often pre-release, or seemingly harmless acts of copyright infringement, to weapons, human organs, hardcore pornography and all sorts of perversions. "Numerous criminal activities are going on in the deep web including drug dealings (selling or buying), contract for assassinations, pornography industry including child pornography, sales of human body organs, human trafficking and sex trafficking, transactions for illegal shipment of arms, sales of stolen goods, sales of hacked cyber identity information, terrorism activities, and many more" (Ozkaya, Islam, 2019).

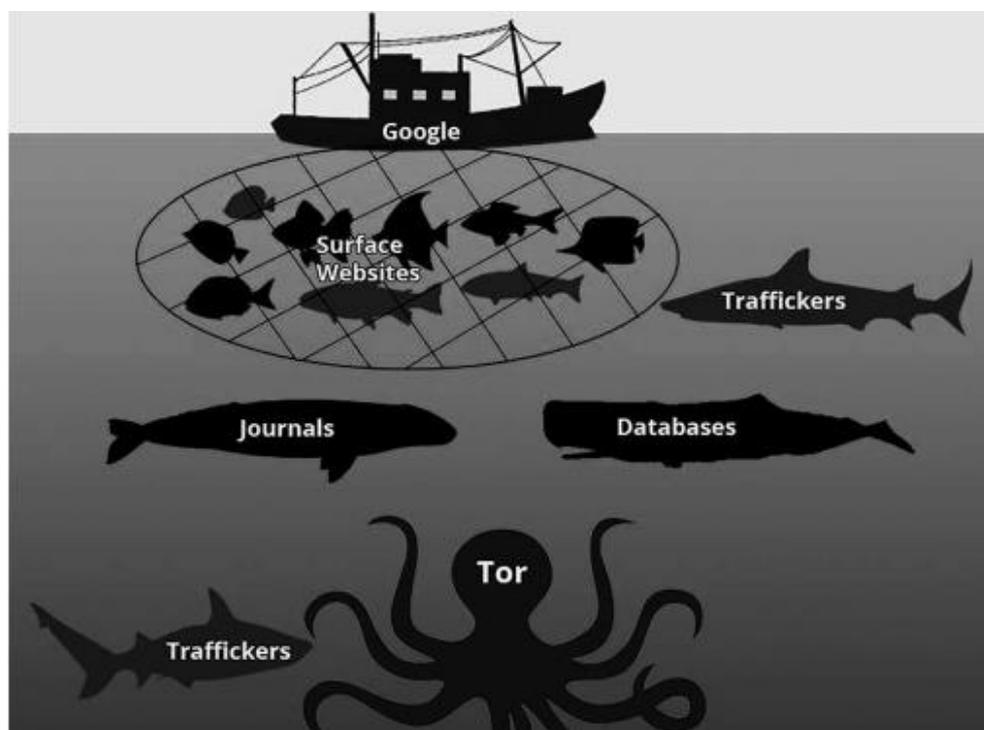
The main users of this very dark space are primarily contract killers, such as murderers, rapists, kidnappers, hackers, etc. "For some, the dark net is the encrypted world of Tor Hidden Services, where users cannot be traced, and cannot be identified.

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<sup>4</sup> Due to the exceptionally cruel scenes, brutal, bloody, awe-inspiring video footage, photos that are posted on the dark web, I will limit myself to only a few aspects of this shocking underground world. This is because the purpose of the article is not to eulogize, much less promote this type of content.

For others, it is those sites not indexed by conventional search engines: an unknowable realm of password protected pages, unlinked websites and hidden content accessible only to those in the know. It has also become a catch-all term for the myriad shocking, disturbing and controversial corners of the net - the realm of imagined criminals and predators of all shapes and sizes" (Bartlett, 2016).

The dark web is a deeply hidden web that exists for real and functions alongside the well-known indexed web. However, Google's popular web browser won't find its sites, and YouTube, Facebook or WhatsApp won't play material posted there. Compared to the 3% surface web "the deep web is of massive size is 4,000-5,000 times larger than that of surface web" (Cf. Ozkaya, Islam, 2019). The above-described a snapshot of the deep search interface are shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** The Dark Web activities (Ozkaya, Islam, 2019).

The information, content and people that are on the Dark Web are a huge threat to all internet users and especially to young people and children. Hackers - internet users who have the ability to manipulate IP addresses - have incredible IT skills, are able to manipulate data and then access, for example, the cameras on unsuspecting users' laptops in order to then blackmail, extort, threaten or otherwise pressure them.

It is comforting to know that only a small number of young people today know how to access the Dark Web, as it is a complex process that requires knowledge of how operating systems work, which often makes it difficult to overcome the necessary safety measures. Unfortunately, like mushrooms after rain, tutorials and articles are now appearing on the Internet that instruct step-by-step how to get into this hidden and encrypted space.

### 3. Ending

Day by day, more and more people live in the conviction that they have no influence on the rushing current of events, so they settle for the illusion of living in virtual space, sinking deeper and deeper into Castells' 'timeless' time and 'spaceless' space. Timeless time creates a culture of 'true reality', being 'merely an emergent, dominant form of social time in network society, just as the space of flows does not negate the existence of places' (Castells, 2008). We thus live in two worlds simultaneously, that is, the physical and the virtual. Moreover, these worlds, interpenetrating each other, not only force contemporary people to function simultaneously in these diametrically opposed realities, but, above all, shape our consciousness and force a change in the pace and quality of life, to an extent unmatched by previous generations. Each of these worlds has very different conditions: different values, forms of expression, needs, expectations, skills, as well as different sensitivities, which creates a certain epistemological and axiological confusion, the effect of which may be the loss of meaning and existential emptiness to which young people in particular are exposed.

The effect of living in several dimensions at the same time is paradoxically, a permanent lack of time to reliably perform our daily duties, on which our lives and their quality depend. And most importantly, it is important to remember that this modern world of the internet, is 'an underworld set apart yet connected to the internet we inhabit, a world of complete freedom and anonymity, and where users say and do what they like, uncensored, unregulated, and outside of society's norms. It is a world that is as shocking and disturbing as it is innovative and creative, a world that is also much closer than you think.

The dark net is rarely out of the news - with stories of young people sharing homemade pornography, of cyberbullies and trolls tormenting strangers, of political extremists peddling propaganda, of illegal goods, drugs and confidential documents only a click or two away appearing in headlines almost daily - but it is still a world that is, for the most part, unexplored and little understood" (Bartlett, 2016).

Young people are influenced by what they see on the Internet, and viewing drastic, extremely violent content has a negative impact on their minds and psychological development, distorts the concept of love, empathy and makes it difficult to function normally in society.

On an optimistic note, many Internet users avoid the Dark Web out of fear or because they lack the skills to get there. Sometimes people who have no 'bad' intentions try to get into this part of the Internet. The reason may be that they are looking for information hidden by particular governments, concerning their own or other countries' information, they want to access hard-to-get films, commercial music, sometimes they want to buy products without paying taxes, etc. However, the dangers that lurk on the Dark Web, according to many Internet users, are not worth the risk, in the form of data theft, the seizure of bank accounts or identities.

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