
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Internet – good or bad?



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Rob

Hello welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Rob.

Neil

And I'm Neil.

Rob

Can you remember the first time you ever used the World Wide Web or as we often call it, the internet, and what you used it for?

Neil

Oh that's a good question. I do remember. And nothing really changes does it? Because I looked up pictures of cats!

Rob

Cats! Very useful, anyway do you think the internet has generally been positive or negative for the world?

Neil

Wow, that's a big question. A huge question. I don't know if I can answer that.

Rob

Well one person who perhaps can answer it, is the man who invented it: British computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee. We'll find out what he thinks has become of his 'child' shortly but before that, a question for you all. When did Berners-Lee first suggest the idea for what would become the World Wide Web? was it?

- a) 1985
- b) 1989
- c) 1991

Neil

Tricky but I think it's earlier than people think so I'm going to go for 1985.

Rob

Well that was a long time ago but we'll reveal the answer a little later in the programme. I think it's true to say that the internet has been one of, if not the most important technological developments perhaps of all time. Would you agree Neil?

Neil

Well it's hard to imagine living without it. Not impossible, but not nearly as convenient.

Rob

These days we take the internet for granted. We share our lives on social media and not just with friends and family. And that isn't always a positive thing according to the father of the internet, Tim Berners-Lee. In a recent BBC Tech Tent programme he talked about his concerns with the internet and particularly the companies that control its information. Companies which he calls 'internet giants'. What does he say he thought these companies had to do?

Tim Berners-Lee

Initially I felt the main thing an internet giant had to do was just to be **neutral**, just be a platform and humanity, once connected by technology, will do wonderful things. And clearly it doesn't work like that. If you connect humanity via Wikipedia then they do produce, in general, wonderful things. If you connect people by social network where they have **anonymity**, then it can bring out the very nastiest of people.

Rob

So what did he say he thought these internet giants had to do?

Neil

He said that he thought **initially**, that they just had to be **neutral**. **Initially** means 'at first', 'in the beginning' and it also suggests that later he changed his mind. Anyway, he said that he thought they just had to be **neutral**. **Neutral** here means that they didn't need to do anything, they didn't need to control the internet or information. He thought it would be a tool to connect people and ideas and information and it would be wonderful.

Rob

But it's not all good, is it?

Neil

No. He does say that giving people access to sources of information is generally a good thing but that when it comes to social networks, social media, people have **anonymity**.

Rob

Anonymity?

Neil

Yes. It means that on the internet people can hide their true identity or personality. Some people write things that they would never say to someone in person because they think there will be no consequences. Berners-Lee says anonymity can bring out the nastiest side of people. People saying horrible and terrible things to each other.

Rob

Berners-Lee does have some suggestions for how this could be changed. And it's based on the idea of likes and shares, which he calls **kudos**. What's his suggestion?

Tim Berners-Lee

The different social networks and different platforms are in different situations and in some cases they have acknowledged there is an issue. I think they realise that the issue could be hugely **ameliorated** by **tweaking** the way the thing works by changing the way retweets are propagated or changing the way people get **kudos** - give them more kudos for being constructive for example.

Rob

So how does he think companies could address the problem?

Neil

Well, he says that some of the social networks have agreed that there is a problem and they know what could improve it.

Rob

He didn't use the word improve though, did he?

Neil

No he actually used the rather formal verb **ameliorate**, which means 'to improve or make something better'.

Rob

So how does he suggest the problem could be **ameliorated**?

Neil

By **tweaking** the way in which people give or receive **kudos**. **Tweaking** means 'making a small change to the way something works'. Much of what happens on the internet is driven by our desire to get likes and shares – this is the **kudos** that Berners-Lee talks about. He feels that **tweaking** this could lead to a better experience. For example, getting more **kudos** for constructive or positive actions.

Rob

Mmm, interesting – but I wonder who would decide if something is constructive?

Neil

Well that's another big question for another day, I guess.

Rob

For now though, let's have the answer to our small question. In what year did Berners-Lee present the idea for what would become the World Wide Web? The options were a) 1985, b) 1989 or c) 1991. It was in fact 1989. Now before we go let's have a quick recap of today's vocabulary.

Neil

Initially – means 'at first - in the beginning'. Then we had **neutral**.

Rob

In this case it meant 'not controlling' or 'not taking any action to control'.

Neil

Then there was the noun **anonymity** which is the state of having a hidden identity or personality.

Rob

Next, to **ameliorate** a situation is to make it better.

Neil

To **tweak** something is to make a small change to the way something works.

Rob

And then we had **kudos**. **Kudos** is praise and appreciation for something you've done.

Neil

Well **kudos** to you Rob for today's programme. Thank you very much.

Rob

Well, thank you Neil and thank you everyone for listening. That's all we have today but you can, find us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, and of course our website bbclearningenglish.com! Bye for now.

Neil

Thanks for joining us and goodbye.