

Maiya Groff
Honors: US History 2
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Groff, Emma. Personal interview with the author. Holtwood, PA. October 11, 2016.

Overview:

Computers and the internet have been playing a pivotal role in American history since the 1970s. They have affected many aspects of our society and culture, from economics to the way we get and use information. It has also impacted our society on an emotional level. Emma Groff has lived through the rise of computers and has witnessed first hand the effect these technologies have had on people and society.

Question (Maiya): ...What was your childhood like? Did you have access to computers?

Answer (Emma): Yes, I had access to computers when I was about, I think, eight years old. My dad brought home an Atari, I forget which one, but he brought home an Atari, with a couple of games. Tonka was my favorite game at the time. It was this blocky character who walked around and fought little wizard things; I don't really remember it very well. I do remember the music, though.

Question (Maiya): Was that the best part?

Answer (Emma): Possibly.

Question (Maiya): Where there any other uses of the computer?

Answer (Emma): Well, we were able to program with it, which my first experience of that was I remember programming lines to go across the screen. It was very exciting.

Question (Maiya): New technology for the time period?

Answer (Emma): Well, it was. We didn't really have anything like that. I mean, we didn't have video games or DVDS. We had VHSs back then.

Question (Maiya): So, did the Atari take the place of videogames and it became videogames?

Answer (Emma): Well, no, video games, eventually, and video game consoles came out after the Atari. But the Atari was really a computer with a monitor and depending on what configuration you had, you could have a cassette player that played cassette tapes, which I know you're not terrible familiar with. Or, floppy disks, which were these square disks that were floppy because they were made out of thin material and if you had floppy disks, you most likely had a whole stack

of them, that would make up the game, and so you'd reach a certain point in your game and you'd have to put in a new disk to move to the next level. It could be really frustrating at times. And really, the tapes were the same way. The tapes were really slow too from what I remember. They took a long time to load the game up and you had to wait and wait and wait to be able to play it. And then by the time you got to play it, it wasn't that exciting.

Question (Maiya): What was the best part of having a computer when they were relatively new?

Answer (Emma): I mean, it was fun to play with my older brothers when they would let me. If we had a two person game, we could play against each other, and that was a lot of fun. But I think just the idea of being able to create things, make this, you know, box, do things, was probably the most interesting part.

Question (Maiya): How has internet usage changed from the first computers to now?

Answer (Emma): Oh, wow. So when we had our Atari, you have to realize we didn't have internet. Internet actually didn't become widely accessible until much later, probably about almost twenty years later, well maybe not twenty. Let's say twelve to fifteen years later. So AOL was really, everybody was on AOL at the time. Nobody wants to admit being on AOL anymore, but at the time, everyone was on AOL, and so when you would go to be on the internet... So at this point, when I had my first computer, I was eight. By the time I was using the internet, I was eighteen or nineteen. So, ten years later, I guess. So, you would dial up, which, if you remember that time period, you were using your phone line, the same phone line that you get your phonecalls on, potentially. And you would have to dial up your, to sign into the internet, you would have to put in this phone number, and it would dial into the network of that company, so in my case, it was AOL. So, it would dial into AOL and that would put my computer onto their network, and that got me access to the internet, which was what they were able to provide, so, I don't know if you've ever the dial up sound, well that's what we always heard when we would sign onto the internet. And it was really super slow, so the internet at that time period, most likely, when I was first using the internet, I was mostly using it to chat with friends. So there weren't a lot of websites like there are now. When I first started using it, Google wasn't even really created yet, Amazon was really, really new, so there wasn't a whole lot there and most of the internet was in text, or hypertext, so there weren't a lot of images, there weren't the beautiful websites that we see today. Definitely not the videos that we see today, so it was very, very different, but I think anybody in that time period that got on the internet could see and could feel how different, how much it opened up communication, and the ability to, to really converse with somebody on the other side of the world at any time. You know, the ability to send an email and to have somebody receive it on the other side of the world within seconds, that was pretty amazing because before then, you would have to, you know, either send what we would call "Snail Mail," which, a letter in the mail, or you'd

have to fax something, which was very interesting technology. So it was, it was, it was very exciting, and actually, at that time, I had my first job, and in that job, nobody had email yet, so one of my first jobs in IT was to implement Microsoft Exchange, I think it was, 5.0 in our company. And so that, I implemented Microsoft Exchange, and that was the company's first experience with being able to send emails to each other within in the company and to people outside the company, so that was really quite interesting.

Question (Maiya): Could you compare internet usage now to when it first came out, like much it's changed and how many more people are using it and what they're using it for now compared to in the nineties?

Answer (Emma): Well, yeah, I think that the biggest thing about the internet today that can be contrasted to the internet then is the sheer volume of information and data that is accessible and available today. So in the early days, there wasn't a lot of data and a lot of information because it was new. So you add twenty years to that and you've got twenty years of data and the amount of data that is being captured is growing infinitely. I don't remember the exact stats, but it's a huge amount of data that is being captured in the world today on the internet and so the accessibility to that data and the ability to really use that data to gain knowledge and to share knowledge with other people. The accessibility to knowledge, I think, is the biggest change, and I think it has made a huge change in our culture, in our world, in our ability to really challenge the status quo and to be able to decide when systems don't work for us, what other options we have. I think that's something that without the advent of internet technology, I don't think we would be where we are today. I think that despite all of the problems and challenges so many people see in the world, I see that we are growing as a humanity, that we are really tearing down those walls, and while it might be a scary time, it's also a very empowering time, as that's happening.

Question (Maiya): ... So, with the spread of all this new information, there has to be some reforms to the copyright laws, I'm assuming. You were a teenager, a young adult, growing up in a time period of Napster, where streaming and sharing music was essential. Can you share about that?

Answer (Emma): Yeah, I remember the first time I used Napster and you know, I used it a good bit when it first came out, before, I think, before we really fully understood. I know at the time, I didn't understand, sort of, the consequences of Napster and how we shared files back and forth. So, I don't know how familiar you are with Napster, but the way it worked, it worked on a technology called peer to peer file sharing, which was really new and well, it actually wasn't new, but it was new in the way it was packaged to the world, as a way to share files with your friends. Certainly, it was network technology that had existed previously, but suddenly we were able to log in to the system and, you know, search for a file, and it was a little bit of a clunky system, but I remember being really excited by it. You know, for the first time period in my life, actually, I found music to be extremely accessible, you know, whereas before, it might have been

harder. I might've had to go to a record store to find music. I was able to log in to Napster and discover these artists and this music that I probably would've never discovered otherwise, especially because I'm not a huge shopper and didn't like to go to stores a lot. So, for me, it was amazing to be able to see, to be able to have that access to music and to be able to share the music that way. But obviously, I'm now working in a company that is a record label, so I have very very different views now on how we should respect our musicians and protect them through copyright laws. So now, it's, you know, I view it as very important and I think with our technology changing so drastically from where we were then, where we had peer to peer file sharing, we clearly realized that there were issues with that, but it also tore down a lot of walls, while at the same time, I think, building up some business around record labels, and fast forward to today, where we have streaming technology, that is, kind of, again coming back to a very different place for us and I think it's very important that we do protect our artists and musicians with our copyright laws, and make sure that we are paying them appropriately for the amazing service that they provide society.

Question (Maiya): So, you just mentioned that you're not a huge shopper, and we were just talking about Amazon a little bit ago, so do you remember the first time that you ever bought something off of Amazon and what that was like?

Answer (Emma): I do. It was a book. I remember when Amazon was only books and it was the most awesome amazing thing in the world because a lot like Napster, suddenly we had access to books that, you know, were a little bit harder to find in bookstores. Bookstores were one of the few places I do like to shop, but it was still, it was amazing! You know, and I remember those really early days with Amazon and you know, fast forward to today, I think Jeff Bezos has had an amazing impact on the world of ecommerce. His, really, Amazon has helped to drive ecommerce and the growth of ecommerce, and since I actually do work in ecommerce, you know, I sort of watch and admire, begrudgingly, how Amazon works. There's a lot about Amazon that I think is very negative to our society. They have a strong focus on driving the price down on products and I think that really feeds into consumerism in our society, so as much as I have enjoyed watching Amazon over the years and as much as I admittedly still will buy things from Amazon, I also see, really, some strong negatives to what Amazon has brought to the world. But, I think like most things, there are positives and negatives when there is big change.

Question (Maiya): So, you just mentioned consumerism. Could you compare times before online ecommerce stores and after ecommerce stores and how that's changed, marketability wise?

Answer (Emma): Hm. Well, definitely ecommerce has brought a completely different, completely different approach to marketing. And it's not just ecommerce, just the internet as a whole, our ability to really track what people are interested in, down to the point that we can see where on a webpage they're

focusing, how far down a page they read, what they click on on the page, we can really draw some conclusions from how they interact with websites and be able to target them specifically based on that. And from a marketing standpoint, we can track how many times a person has come to our website, what search queries got them to our website, what website they came from before they got to us, once they got to our site, what did they do, and then we can come up with an understanding of their journey and then specifically target the message to them to say, "Hey, based on all of this information, we think you might like this product! How about you buy it?" So, from a consumerism standpoint, I think it's both positive and negative. So, there's a lot more information being thrown at people, and I think that has really caused people to feel as if they have to have so much more in their life because they have so many different touch points of different companies saying, "Hey, we know this about you! We think you would like this product!" So I think it is an interesting time period in our history and I think there's some benefits to it. Clearly, the more finely tuned companies can become, in understanding what matters to you, the better they can provide services to you. But on the flipside of that, if you're not clear on who you are and what's valuable to you, you will become very distracted, and you will become very consumer, product focused. So, it becomes more and more important for individuals to really know who they are and what they value.

Question (Maiya): ... So, Facebook was also prevalent, very much so, in this time period; I would assume along with AOL because they were both messaging sites for friends. Could you talk about Facebook?

Answer (Emma): So, Facebook, I don't know if you know this or not, Facebook, when it was originally created by Mark Zuckerberg, was actually created for university students. So, how I got introduced to Facebook, one of my younger sister's was in college at the time, and somebody had introduced her to Facebook and she called me up and she said, "Emma, you really have to get on FaceBook because we can share pictures and post to each other how we're doing in our lives!" And I was like, "Oh, well that sounds interesting." So I signed up for an account when it was very first available, but I then didn't use it for many years, and really didn't quite relate to it for a very long time until I actually had kids, Maiya, and then, you know, started to realize it as a way to share, to share with my friends and family. You know, so it is something now that I think there's, there's so much that can be shared through it, and like Twitter and all other forms, Instagram, all other forms of social media, it has pluses and negatives. You have to be careful with it, to be careful of how you spend your time on it, you have to be careful of the information that you're sharing on it. And you also have to be careful of the information that you're consuming from it. You know, my Facebook feed, I'm very happy to say, is mostly extremely positive, but I know other people whose Facebook feeds are very negative, and they find themselves very depressed by that, and you have to take breaks from Facebook because of it, so I think it's very important, again, to know who you are and what you value, and then to live your life in a way that supports that.

Question (Maiya): So talking about social media, you grew before, you were growing up as a child before a lot of these social media sites were around, and I'm growing up immersed in this culture of social media and everything's online. Could you compare growing up without social media to now, a time period of social media, and how people's lives and positivity is being affected?

Answer (Emma): Well, I mean, I think it's interesting. I don't know that, anecdotally, I don't know that I can say people are more or less positive because of the internet and social media, but what I can tell you is that what I feel myself, and what I've heard many, many other people express is that time seems to be going faster. And what I think that relates to is, again, going back to all those different touch points of our attention. When we are asked to focus on so many different things in such a short period of time, when we are given so much information in very short periods of time, I think our mind has to process faster, so, you know, going back to my childhood, you know, well, I was homeschooled so I rarely spent time with friends. It was more a weekend thing, for me to spend time with friends, so, you know, my time, I would say, time was slower. It was at a more steady pace. You know, I had plenty of time, I felt like I always had plenty of time to be able to read books. I remember spending just whole leisurely afternoons, you know, out laying in the yard, reading a book and not feeling any pressure to do anything else, not feeling any pressure to check social media or my email or my cell phone for texts. And I think there's, there's something very soothing and comforting and relaxing about that that is hard to get back to today without intentionally taking a break from technology. So today, you know, and I've watched you do this, you certainly have relaxed in the yard reading a book, too, but you've got your phone next to you and every few minutes you're looking at Instagram or checking for texts or responding to something somebody sent you. You know, I think that's something we have to be cautious around. I do it myself, too. I mean, it would be really hard for me not to because, you know, for my work, I need to be available on my technology devices, so it's very hard to break away from it. And I think that is something that as a people, we're going to have to understand and learn how to relate to. It's not, I think it's too early for us to say that it actually is a negative thing. I think it is something that we are growing and evolving through. I see kids doing things that kids when I was growing up, would never be able to do. And, you know, I think it is an evolution for us. You know, I've heard arguments saying that children shouldn't have devices and they shouldn't be able to communicate via text or Facebook or you know, whatever forms of communication, and I kinda [sic] see it on the reverse side. I think that we're learning new ways of communicating that we haven't had before, and I think that is only going to grow and expand, and it's part of our evolution. I think that, well, I know that it wouldn't be here in our lives unless it was part of our evolution. So, it is something that we have to grow and learn through, but that it also may not hurt to take breaks every once in awhile.

Question (Maiya): ... So back to consumerism, before all the online stores, people would have to go out to stores and physically purchase things. And

then with this evolution of online stores, it made buying and purchasing things a lot more accessible. Do you think that's helped the economy because it's made it a lot more accessible?

Answer (Emma): So, has it helped the economy, so, there's a couple of things. One, I think that while it has made things more available, it has also driven the cost down, not the cost, the price down on items without, necessarily, driving the cost down in all cases. So, you know, I think it is harder, in some cases, for companies to make profits off of what they sell and to be profitable, but... So, I am more and more leaning toward it being, actually, a strong negative for us, economically and socially. So to explain a little bit more what I mean behind that I think that what I have seen in my lifetime going back to being a very, very small child to where I am now, what I have seen is as a very small child, I can remember going into local stores with my family, and we knew the store owners and you know, they were part of our community. And we understood their business impact on our community and we understood the value that their business had on our community. We could talk one-on-one with the store owners. We could find out where they got their products from, and if the way that they sourced their products was ethical and something that we would uphold in our own life. And today, I find it much harder to even, to even recognize that that is something we should be doing. It's so easy to go onto Amazon and buy something in less than five minutes. And what we lose in that process is the ability to ask that question and to even value the question of, "Was the way that this product was sourced, was it ethical? Was it humane? Was this piece of clothing produced in a sweatshop? By children? In a third-world country? How did this article of clothing reach me? Who was involved? Who touched it? Whose life is this impacting when I buy this article of clothing?" I think losing sight of those questions, regardless of the economical question, I think losing sight of those questions impacts us on a humane level, about how we care about each other. And I think we see that not just in the products that we buy, but in the food that we buy in the food industry. The same thing, you know. I mean, we have chickens that we grow in our yard, and we love and care for them and won't eat them because we love and care for them. You know, but it's so easy to go to the grocery store and buy a pack of chicken breast and not think about the life that that chicken had, those chickens had. You know, stuck in a cage in a very inhumane way, living a life that would bring tears to our eyes if we actually saw them. You know, that if we saw the chickens and how they're growing, we would never choose to eat their breast. And we lose that by our easy access to products. It's so much different when you have to go lop the head of the chicken, you know. It becomes way more real when you have to take care of that chicken. It becomes way more real when you're looking that chicken in the eye and you know who he is or she is. It's a different story, you know. And the same for cows, and pigs, and all of the food that we eat. The plants that we eat, when we know who has touched it and how it's been brought to us, who was impacted by it. It totally changes how we relate to the products. And I think, to me, leaving aside the economic value again, I think that's where I see the biggest challenge to us as a people.

Question (Maiya): So you were talking about how if we knew what actually happened with those chickens, we wouldn't, most likely, buy those products. So, I've seen videos on Facebook, social media, whatever, of those kinds of things. How do you think the spread of information, not just relating to this topic, but it's the internet and computers, have made it so much easier and faster to just spread information. But is there a danger to how fast the information is being spread? And what kind of information is being spread?

Answer (Emma): No, generally I think that information that is truthful, there is no danger to how it is being spread. But, I think it is just as easy to spread disinformation as it is to spread, or misinformation, as it is to spread good information. So again, I think it goes back to competing time, you know. You only have so much that you can consume in a day, so being conscious and aware of the information that you're taking in... I think that if you're, if you're not really careful to think critically about information, if you're not careful to check facts and sources behind information, it can be a very dangerous thing. And I think that it could be very easy to lull people into believing things that are not true when they're not, those people themselves, aren't willing to check facts and sources. I think that critical thinking becomes all the more important for society to be able to really assess facts and whether or not a truth resonates at the deepest core of who they are. It's not just about critical thinking, but it's also, then again, how something matches with your value system and really knowing your value system and knowing what you do or don't believe in.

Question (Maiya): In history class, we were learning about propaganda, and how they used that to aid war causes... Obviously, the internet and the spread of this information, is it harder for countries, individuals, whatever, to make and spread propaganda?

Answer (Emma): Again, I think it goes back to people's willingness to engage the hard questions, which, oddly or not oddly enough, brings me back to the whole consumerism and our willingness to just easily buy something without checking sources and understanding where something comes from. I think it lulls us, as a society, into not caring. As soon as we lose compassion, as soon as we lose the caring for another person, another human being whether we know that human being or not, I think that changes who we are. We become much more easily lulled into believing propaganda. We become much more gullible when we give up our right and our free will and our ability to think critically. So, yes and no. I think, also, the other aspect of this is that, from a governmental standpoint, networks can be locked down. China, for example, locks their network down quite a bit, and they control what information people have access to and don't have access to. That's why I think, I think that is wrong, and that should not be allowed ever in any society. I think people should have access to all the information, good and bad, misinformation or truthful information. They should have access to that because that's where our free will comes into play. That's

where we are able to assess the facts for ourselves, and do the research, and make the decision. As soon as you remove people's access to information, you also remove a level of their ability to have free will.

Question (Maiya): You mentioned the change in compassion. Have you... noticed a change in compassion from being a small child growing up without a computer to gradually becoming more and more immersed in this society of gullibleness and online-ness [sic]? Have you noticed a change in compassion in people?

Answer (Emma): I think it's interesting. I think that this, again, well, again, we're experiencing this, so this is a necessary evolution for us. As a small child, we might have had compassion for our close-knit community, right? But what we didn't necessarily have was compassion for a global community. What I see as different, from then to now, and you know, you also have to keep in mind that I was a child then and I'm an adult now, so my perspective, also, is very different. My childhood memories, I'm looking at it from a child's perspective, and as an adult, I'm looking at it from a different perspective. But, what I would say is that we have far more visibility and access to understanding global concerns, to understanding that the orphan on the street in India is no different from us. They're a human, just like us, experiencing intense pain and suffering. In a lot of ways, I would argue that our, our compassion actually expanded. Our ability to have compassion has expanded. As a child, I might have seen pictures or have heard stories, you know, read National Geographic magazines about children in Africa, starving, and I do remember reading those National Geographic magazines. It's not the same as being able to see them on the news or being able to follow a story in a blog about, you know, a young man in Africa going around and building wells to help his people. I think, I think what we have access to today, should we choose to accept it, is a much more expanded view of who we are, that we are all connected in a really fundamental way, whether it be human to human, or human and animals, humans and plants, human and Mother Earth. We are really all one, and our connectedness is foundational to that compassion. Understanding that we're all connected and having compassion go hand-in-hand. As soon as, as soon as you can look at another person or another being and see yourself in them, then you know that you have that compassion. I think that... our ability to have compassion is much greater than it could have been twenty, thirty, forty years ago. I think it's totally up to us where we take it.

Question (Maiya): That's all I have for questions. Are there any last comments you'd like to share relating to the internet and computers?

Answer (Emma): No, I don't think so.

Maiya: Ok. Thank you for your time.

Emma: Thank you.