

Is an erasable Internet a good idea?

By Farhad Manjoo, Wall Street Journal

This is going to sound silly, but I think Snapchat was the most important technology of 2013.

It sounds silly because Snapchat is just an app. What's more, it's an app used primarily by teens and college students, and wasn't I telling you just a few weeks ago that young people aren't good predictors of tech success?

Snapchat sends so-called ephemeral messages, photos and captions that disappear a few seconds after the recipient opens them. Self-destructing photos sound like a recipe for mischief. When people first hear about Snapchat, they likely picture acts by a certain disgraced former congressman.

If the Snapchat model takes off – if other sites and services began to promote the idea of erasability as a competitive feature – the Internet would look very different from the Internet of today. It would be a more private network, one without the constant worry of every ill-considered picture or thought being held up for ridicule by the whole world, forever. But it also might be a less useful Internet, a network on which you couldn't look up an old photo every time you felt nostalgic, or where computers wouldn't always feed you suggestions based on your history, since your history wouldn't be complete.

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