General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

'Big business cannot be trusted.' Discuss.

Adi Chew | 11A01A

A deep mistrust of large enterprises has existed for a long time, since the Industrial Revolution. The evil corporation has become a significant part of our culture and consciousness, leading many to decry its increasing power, just as people did during the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, the near-exclusive focus of these companies on profit maximisation and their ability to get away with unscrupulous practices due to their size do seem to justify a fundamental suspicion of big businesses, both of their products and of their practices. Even so, I believe that the consumers will eventually learn of unscrupulous manufacturing practices, and that big business can be trusted as it is in the interest of profit to be trustworthy, especially if governmental oversight is strong.

Every firm seeks profit maximisation as a key, if not absolute, goal. However, unlike small firms which could conceivably be founded by passionate individuals who consider their desire to meet a need or fulfil some altruistic aim as another goal, large corporations tend to involve a great number of diverse and often dispassionate individuals with profit as their sole venturing goal. Therefore, the motive for large corporations to engage in unscrupulous acts that increase short-run profit is stronger. For instance, the stakeholders of the Sanlu Corporation were not motivated by a certain desire to provide wholesome dairy products to the Chinese. Rather, the panoply of stakeholders, including New Zealand firm Fonterra, were motivated by a desire to maximise profit from the relatively untapped Chinese dairy market. This gave them the incentive to engage in the profit-maximising measure of melamine "enhancement", which lowered the need for protein powder and hence costs of production, and increased profit. This is less likely to happen in a small independent firm whose founder is more likely to consider the altruistic aim of supplying quality milk. This increased emphasis on profit maximisation makes big business inherently untrustworthy.

Big business is not only inherently more motivated to engage in unscrupulous profit-maximising behaviour, but is also more able to evade detection. Its sheer scale enables it to employ more creative and effective means of cover-up and deception, keeping consumers in the dark. Enron was able to maintain its fraud partly because of its ability to use its vast financial resources to employ highly creative accountants to hide it. The creativity of these accountants is only rivalled by that of the financial engineers and consultants employed by CitiGroup and Lehman Brothers, among others, who created collateralised debt obligations and other financial instruments which basically allowed them to sell the same debt many times. This and other financial tomfoolery contributed significantly to the worst recession in eighty years. Of course these firms could not have gotten away with it without pressuring relevant agencies and lawmakers to turn a blind eye, something possible only for that size of company. The fact that big businesses can and do regularly get away with defrauding customers as such gives them impunity to commit whatever untrustworthy act they wish in the name of profit, as opposed to smaller corporations which do not enjoy such impunity. Hence, big business is fundamentally untrustworthy.

There is, however, a limit to the above argument, as it has been proven to be almost impossible to conceal such fraud indefinitely, as some consumers will ultimately sense the suspect quality of their products and blow the whistle. This was the case with Sanlu, whose contamination of milk was discovered by consumers who noticed foul-smelling urine emitted by their children. Despite the aggressive concealment measures taken, such as assault on whistleblowers, the contamination was finally exposed to national scandal. This led to the shaming of the now-bankrupt company. A similar process occurred with the US investment banks, when their customers wondered what exactly they were trading and whether it was overpriced. This led to a crisis in confidence and the collapse of Lehman and Bear Sterns, among others. This acts as a disincentive for dishonesty, as fraudulent actions result in the possibility of short-run profit but also of long-run loss of reputation and collapse.

Building upon the previous paragraph, the long-run profit motive is actually congruent with trustworthiness, as the long-run profits from good reputation act as an incentive for honesty, just as the converse is true. Trustworthiness in product quality and actions may lead to the forgoing of some short-run profit in return for a good reputation and sustainable long-run profits. Many corporations have based their business model on trustworthiness, to great success. For instance, Mercedes-Benz has touted the unsurpassed reliability of both its cars and its after-sales service, such that it was the car of choice for both Hitler and Adenauer, and remains so for countless VIPs and upper-middle class professionals in Germany and worldwide. Big businesses recognise the usefulness of this trust in maximising profit and act trustworthily to maximise their long-run profit, as Toyota has done at the lower-middle spectrum of the same market. This incentive makes big businesses likely to be trustworthy precisely because of their focus on long-run profit.

The trustworthiness of big businesses can be further reinforced as there are sound processes in place to oversee their operations. Big businesses can be trusted if the governments supervising them can be trusted as well. Strict control and harsh penalties make it unfeasible for companies, big or small, to be dishonest. For instance, Singaporean banks are relatively more trustworthy than US banks due to the their capital adequacy ratios and other stringent regulations, which make it harder to engage in "creative" investment banking, and the penalties for fraudulent behaviour, such as that paid by DBS due to the "High Notes" fiasco, act as disincentives to such fraud. Similarly, Singapore's food and beverage brands such as Prima and Khong Guan Food are regional leaders in both revenue and trust due to stringent regulations on food production. Thus big business can be trusted if government can be trusted as well.

In conclusion, it is untrue that big business cannot be trusted. While the increased profit motive and ease of escaping detection makes large enterprises more likely to commit fraudulent acts, the unlikely nature of eternal concealment and the long-run profit that can be derived from being trustworthy gives big business numerous incentives to be trustworthy, especially if government oversight is strong. Given that most big businesses are concerned with both sustainability as well as high profits, big businesses are fundamentally likely to be trustworthy as that benefits them in the long-run.

Marker's comments:

You have made a vey compelling case in this essay. Insightful ideas presented and articulated clearly and effectively. Many relevant and appropriate examples. Do bear in mind that Toyota may be an example where big businesses cannot be trusted, given the number of recalls in recent years, all because of its desire to overtake GM to be number one carmaker.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 21

'Big business cannot be trusted.' Discuss.

Dora Heng | 11S06U

The proliferation of technology and increased flow of information and people across borders has resulted in the growth and expansion of major corporations. In today's world, we see the far-reaching effects of these large companies in our everyday lives, be it the shoes we wear (Nike) or the food we eat (McDonald's). Some may argue that, given corporate social responsibility that features prominently in the ethos of big companies and how these same companies have seemingly built their businesses around consumer interest, the growth of corporations is advantageous to the public, and thus they can be depended on and trusted. However, I am of the belief that the profit-maximising objective that major businesses seek to achieve renders them untrustworthy.

Firstly, as many big businesses seek the profit-maximising objective, their pursuit of the lowest cost of production is often achieved through unethical means. Nike, a renowned multi-national corporation famous for the sports shoes it manufactures, allegedly operates numerous sweatshops in poor, developing countries like Nigeria. To produce shoes at the lowest cost possible, it has been reported that Nike pays minimal wage and forces workers to operate in terrible conditions that are often characterised by poor ventilation and lighting. Another example is the fast food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken, which employs growth-enhancing hormones to accelerate the growth of chickens. In doing so, KFC is able to increase its revenue by decreasing the length of time it takes to rear a chicken. However, this is done at the expense of the welfare of animals. These chickens that have growth hormones injected into them can grow to gigantic sizes, to the extent that their legs are unable to carry their weight. These two examples highlight how big business should not be trusted as they often employ unethical means such as exploiting workers in developed countries or abusing the rights of animals to increase their business turnover.

Secondly, to protect their industry and business, many influential firms will use their power to sway political agenda to pursue their selfish vested interest, mostly at the expense of the consumer. In the United States, political parties tend to be heavily financed by major corporations. As a result, these corporations have tremendous power over politics and they tend to influence political agenda in their favour. In the late 20th century, when the issue of climate change was brought to light by scientists, many major oil companies like BP and Exxon Mobil lobbied against the pursuit of a green agenda, questioning the validity of scientific data and discrediting the truth of global warming, so as to protect their business of providing non-renewable energy sources. It took more than a decade for global warming to be officially recognised as a threat (despite the availability of clear scientific evidence) and by then, the problem of global warming had worsened. This shows how big business should not be trusted as they often sway political agenda to protect their own selfish interest instead of working to benefit the public.

In addition, in a bid to increase demand for their products, many big businesses employ heavy advertising that aim to manipulate the public's desire for their goods. Many firms rely on extensive market research to understand the profile of their customers. At times, this information is obtained through underhanded means. There was a controversy over the privacy issues on Facebook: advertisers were able to obtain personal information and preferences from Facebook users without their knowledge or consent. Aside from intruding on individuals' privacy, advertisers also manipulate the masses by creating a construct of reality that tricks consumers into desiring their products. The materialistic society that exists today is a result of how advertisers have persuaded consumers that what they have is never enough. The use of heavy advertising that intrudes on privacy and manipulates the mindset of consumers by major corporations demonstrates the fact that most of big business cannot be trusted.

However, critics might suggest otherwise. They believe that major corporations can be relied on given that many have pursued acts of corporate social responsibility that contribute to society. Critics may cite examples such as Unilever, the world's largest producer of soap and food products, that has contributed to society by financing a school in Ghana, a poor African country. Closer to home, we have major banks such as HSBC doing their part to conserve the environment by supporting the Tree-top Walk near Henderson that allows the public to enjoy and appreciate nature. Critics argue that these acts of social responsibility demonstrate how big corporations have the welfare of the public at heart and can be depended on. However, to believe that companies are altruistic and perform these acts of kindness with absolutely no ulterior motives is too idealistic a view to adopt. Instead, I believe corporations practise corporate social responsibility, not purely out of moral obligation, but to achieve their profit-maximising objects. These charitable acts will greatly increase their publicity, and can be seen as an alternative form of advertisement. For example, oil company BP extensively invested in social projects after its disastrous oil spill off the coast of Mexico so as to improve its damaged public image. Hence, the notion that companies pursue corporate social responsibility with an ulterior motive renders them untrustworthy.

Critics may also argue that not all big corporations are necessarily profit-seeking but rather, may exist to achieve a social aim. Companies like The Body Shop are good examples. The Body Shop champions many social causes – it supports fair trade by purchasing raw materials from disadvantaged communities in Africa although it might reduce its own profit margin; it also supports putting an end to human trafficking by displaying such messages on product wrappings although doing so might incur extra costs. Undeniably, there may be social enterprises that do not pursue profit-maximising goals; however I feel these are simply exceptions to the rule, and these social enterprises often are the minority.

In conclusion, big major conglomerates cannot be trusted given their profit- maximisation objective, which result in unethical means of production, placing the interest of the company before the well-being of consumers and manipulating public mindset. Although there exist businesses that do good, they may be performing good acts with ulterior motives, or are part of the minority group of social enterprises that is not representative of most major businesses.

Marker's comments:

Fluently, convincingly written.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 24 | Do you agree that the barriers to scientific research in the 21st century are more ideological than technological?

Tan Yi Jie Gifford | 11S03R

In the 20th century, when mankind took his first step into the "final frontier" of space and landed an astronaut, Neil Armstrong, on the moon, it seemed as if there was no barrier that scientific research and technology could not break..The scientific research required for everything from the trajectory of the space shuttle and the likely problems a man would experience in space manifested itself as seemingly impregnable technological barriers, but gradually, with brains and computers, mankind set foot on the moon. If we fast forward to the 21st century, where kilometres of underground chambers spanning France at the Large Hadron Collider promises not only particles at light speeds, but also the story of how life began, it would seem to many that scientific research in this century would only face ideological potholes, rather than technological ones. Whilst I agree there are many moral, ethical and spiritual grouses that could throw a spanner into scientific research, I believe we cannot discount the formidable technological barriers; in fact, there are even cases where both obstacles seem more alike than distinctly separate barriers.

There are many who argue that the sanctity of life should be regarded with utmost respect and that mankind cannot desire to experiment with God's creations without dire consequences. In America, the religious cause behind the discontent is palpable, as some sections of the American population are already against the use of contraception as it is deemed unholy in strict biblical implications, much less the experimentation and research on possible methods to create life outside a "family unit" of a husband and wife. The cacophony of disapproval against scientific research on reproductive cloning has led to the stagnation of research in this area. The repercussion of jail terms and a lack of any organisation willing to extend legal grants to this form of research are prime examples of how ideological objections have grounded scientific research to a halt in certain places, like some states in America, widely regarded as one of the leaders in pioneering and innovating new methods of scientific research.

There are also many who try to assume the moral high ground by championing animal rights against the advances of scientific research. In many laboratory settings, the use of animal test subjects to test the effects of a wide array of concoctions ranging from cosmetic potions to potentially life-saving medication is pervasive. Viral YouTube videos of how rabbits are used to test dermatological products or eye drops, only to suffer obscene eye conditions resulting from unsafe and dangerous test products have led to a public outcry against the scientific research into the effects of chemicals on animals. They argue from ideological vantage points of animal rights and cruelty against the economic efficiency of using rabbits as test subjects. These obstacles have been gaining traction, as animal activists have tried to take action by filing lawsuits against these cosmetic companies, and spreading videos of animal cruelty with the intent to boycott such products. Hence, there are considerable ideological barriers to scientific research in other more commercial industries as well.

There are also many critics of scientific research areas like stem cells, citing the oft-quoted moral and human rights arguments. Modifying the gametic stem cells of humans is illegal, meaning that parents are not able to modify the traits that their children will inherit. A world where the rich can pay to endow their children with supernatural strength or unparallelled intelligence is a future that many cannot stomach. Hence, stem cell research, which hold the possibility of finding cures for life-threatening diseases and ensuring that children will not inherit debilitating diseases like Parkinson's or Huntington's disease, is not possible in the near future. Even in the face of such promise, the steadfast ideological barriers still remain, and are a testament to our resolve to uphold moral and ethical concerns so that scientific research in these controversial areas can never take place.

However, I believe that there are also many technological barriers that cannot be overlooked. The Large Hadron Collider (LHC) may have promised us the ability to research and understand the origins of "dark matter" and its link to the creation of our universe and the world as we know it; however, what it has really yielded is just months of maintenance work. The LHC has only been able to undergo a few test runs, but has spent months on end in the hands of technicians as they struggle to fix and overcome the mammoth technological task of maintaining its kilometres of vacuum-sealed chambers. Even with the current crop of precision engineering equipment, the

mechanical difficulty of making sure that the entire length of the system is running at optimal conditions remains an as-yet insurmountable task. Hence, it would be unfair and ignorant to believe that the technological barriers to scientific research on the atom is a small problem with our improved engineering expertise, and I believe that the technological challenge will play as pivotal a role as the outcry condemning the research into the creation of our world as against the biblical interpretation that God created the world. Without functioning equipment, scientific research will have little means by which to conduct itself.

Furthermore, there are many areas where scientific research has reached a roadblock because of the limitations of our technology. Even with the advent and growing ubiquity of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scans on the brain in the 21st century, there are many areas in the field of neurology that mankind is unable to break through. While we are increasingly able to detect changes in electrical and brain waves, humans do not have a machine or process that can accurately measure and objectively quantify less tangible things like our emotions, our memories and our character. The inner workings of our psyche have proven to be elusive to any machine that our current level of technology can build. Hence, hallmarks of scientific research, like the accuracy and precision with which data is stored, cannot be carried out as we are as yet limited by our technological means to do so. Hence, I believe that there are many technological limitations that have confined the boundaries of our scientific research, even in the 21st century with our current state of hardware.

In addition, there have been cases where ideological barriers have been circumvented or eroded in our quest for scientific knowledge in the 21st century. Increasingly, the Body Shop brand name has been gaining recognition and support by a growing fan base. It distinguishes itself from other cosmetic companies by proclaiming that they are against animal testing. This also means that they conduct their research of their products without using animals, which pacifies the animal rights activists, giving them no reason to campaign or set up a blockade hindering the company's research and business. Hence, we can see that there is a growing erosion of supposed "ideological barriers" in the way of scientific research, especially in the 21st century where aggressive advertising promoting its "against animal testing" slogan is sold to the public and consumers.

There are also many instances where the line between an ideological barrier and a technological limitation blurs. The discordant voices against stem cell research also partly stem from the fact that current stem cell techniques are primitively undeveloped and potentially unsafe. They argue on ethical grounds that no human (or animal) should be subject to the whims and "ifs" of the scientist in the laboratory, and are immensely concerned about the potential detrimental effects of an experiment gone wrong. Hence, many object to such research, which in turn prevents scientists from receiving grants from sympathetic or earnest governments to conduct research and make headway into the techniques. But underlying this unease is a technological limitation of the equipment and methods used to carry out the procedures like implanting neural nerve cells to cure Alzheimer's. With unproven techniques, there is the real risk of something going wrong, like the growth of tumours and cancer as a result of a botched gene implant job. Hence, I believe that apart from some strong ideological and technological concerns, there are also cases where the barriers blocking us from knowledge and truth are not as distinct and clear-cut between these seemingly disparate disciplines.

Hence, while I agree there remains significant barriers to scientific research in the 21st century, technological advances like MRI machines have made the mechanical limitation less apparent, especially when the increased media attention has turned up the volume of the very public and very loud moral outcries against scientific research. However, these walls, ideological barriers included, are eventually being scaled, and to say that some barriers are strictly ideological would be unfair. Hence, I believe that the barriers to research have both entwined ideological and technological roots.

Marker's comments:

Well argued. Interesting angle to consider the difficulty in distinguishing between technological and ideological barriers in some cases! Very comprehensive, informed discussion. Too much of a listing of ideological vs technological barriers. Better if you evaluated which holds greater sway.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 27

To what extent do you agree that the media has been a liberating force?

Anni Chowdhury | 11S03R

The number of media portals that an average person today has access to is astounding. Cable televisions boast up to 800 channels in countries like Singapore and the United States, and there are countless magazines and informative newsletters available in almost every bookstore, not forgetting the hundreds of newspapers across the globe available to us both in print and online versions. In today's world, the media plays a vital role in providing information, entertainment and most importantly, shedding light on lesser known issues. I feel that the media, being an extremely important tool that has the capability to free people from oppression, voice concerns of the public and enlighten them on issues that are larger than themselves, acts as a liberating force.

Critics always argue that one of the biggest constraints of the media is that it is often censored and manipulated to act as a mouthpiece to promote certain agendas. This is seen in authoritarian governments all over the world that systematically sieve out all potentially controversial or anti-government content from the news and other media forms such as movies and sometimes even music. Due to this, in some instances, the media fails to be a liberating tool as it constrains its viewers and consumers to only one possible viewpoint, restricting the knowledge of the people to solely what the government chooses to make available to its people. For example, the 'Great Firewall' of China blocks out all pro-democratic websites and even search engines such as Google, replacing them with its own censored versions such as Baidu. In this manner, all the exposure that the people receive about events are restricted to what the authorities allow, leaving the people with misconceptions and incomplete information, as seen in the Chinese Xin Hua News Agency's minimal coverage of the devastation caused by the Sichuan Earthquake, which the government sought to downplay. Hence, it is somewhat fair to say that in such instances, the media can misrepresent information when censored, and hence restricts people's knowledge rather than liberates them with access to a range of viewpoints.

However, to a larger extent, the media has become an essential tool that serves to free many people across the globe from oppression by being a voice that sheds light on their predicament. This comes in the form of new media. New media, with its global reach and lightning fast speed of information dissemination, has made possible the rise of a phenomenon known as citizen journalism. Given that everyone with Internet access and the ability to type can now partake in the news dissemination process, new media has given a voice to the common people who are now able to raise issues and garner support and help. From the recent uprisings in Arab nations such as Tunisia and Yemen to the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar, the Internet has been highly effective in bringing global attention to the plight of the oppressed. The protests and riots on the streets of Tripoli against Gaddafi's regime were first made known to the international community through amateur footage uploaded by Facebook and Twitter users, which went on to enlighten the world about the injustice that was ongoing in the region. This even prompted a NATO air raid led by France on Gaddafi's troops, as a sign of support for the people of Libya and their plight. This exemplifies the media's power to liberate the common people from injustice and grant them the freedom to express their opinions.

Furthermore, the media has also played an important role in uncovering the truth that is often intentionally, or not, hidden from the general public. By exposing the truth of many such issues and providing sound and factual representations of situations through the news and documentaries, the media is capable of liberating the masses by enlightening them and equipping them with the truth of the matter. News corporations have the resources and the incentive to carry out undercover reporting and investigations to get to the root of problems and find answers. In the cases of the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prison scandals, the media was able to uncover footage of American soldiers abusing the prisoners and hence spark fierce debate and a government investigation of

the issue to preserve the rights of prisoners. Many documentaries such as Discovery Channel's *'Air Crash Investigation'* also do the same thing and uncover truths about past and present events in an objective way and hence are capable of extracting the truth behind conspiracies and cover-ups and can equip people with this knowledge, freeing them from deceit and fraudulent theories.

In the realm of the arts, the media has liberated people from both geographical and economic constraints and boundaries and has successfully immersed them in the appreciation of the arts. In the past, the arts, in the form of music, plays and films, were restricted to the rich and wealthy or could be appreciated only by those physically close to a theatre, museum or cinema. But with media coverage in the form of television shows, radio and magazines, these art forms are accessible to anyone with a television or a computer. One no longer has to travel to Cannes to see the year's winning entries because there is an entire channel dedicated to playing art films on cable television. Music is no longer confined to certain regions or countries as iTunes and Billboard magazines, and radio shows are accessible worldwide and open to audiences from every nation. This is an excellent representation of how, even with regard to the arts, the media has freed people from geographical and physical boundaries and allowed them access to an entirely new world and countless different cultures through something as accessible as MTV or a Bollywood movie.

Hence, it can be concluded that although in certain instances where censorship is practised, the media can possibly be an oppressive force that has the potential to mislead the masses, in many other instances, the media actually serves to liberate the masses and free them from their ignorance, misconceptions, and oppression. Thus, I strongly feel that in our world today, the media might possibly be one of the most powerful liberating forces available.

Marker's comments:

Fluently written with a strong sense of direction and focus. Good range of examples and perspectives.

essay 32 | 'Social media has changed the face of politics.' To what extent is this true?

Charmaine Yap | 12S03P

Politics is an age-old game of power struggle, but with the advent of the age of information and technology, a fledgling newcomer, social media, has brought about a fundamental shift in the way politics is conducted. Through social media outlets such as social networking sites, forums and weblogs, there has been an empowerment of the individual, and of the masses, a decentralisation of power from politicians to the masses, where the masses now have control of information, and can easily, too, be players in politics on a platform that boasts a global audience of millions. In contrast to what used to be a top-down approach from the authorities to the people, the people can now engage in politics on their own terms, changing the dynamics of interactions between politicians and the masses. In this manner, it can be said that social media has dramatically changed the face of politics.

For social media to effect change on politics, there must first be an acceptance and allowance for free reign of social media. This is not necessarily true in all cases, such as in China, where social media is largely suppressed through censorship by the government. Through censorship, the government maintains control over the flow of information, and the empowerment of the people by social media is greatly limited. For instance, when Liu Xiaobo, a human rights activist and social critic of the government, won the Nobel Peace Prize in January this year, there was an explosion of discussion on social media outlets such as Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. However, these discussions were quickly suppressed by the Chinese authorities, and a forum that discussed the Nobel Peace Prize winner was shut down within fifteen minutes, as the writer was perceived to be a dissident by the Chinese government, and had been jailed for inciting unrest against the government. This is the same approach that the Chinese government has adopted for any politically sensitive material. Similarly, there has been a void regarding issues such as the Uighur riots and the arrest of political artist Ai Weiwei. Simply by suppressing the flow of information on social media networks, the Chinese government has reinforced its authority and prevented any damage social media might have brought about to its political scene. As such, social media remains limited in its ability to bring about changes to politics in instances where it is not embraced but instead suppressed through censorship and control.

However, despite the attempts of government to curb social media, the scale and magnitude of the network renders it difficult to be subjected to the control of any central authority. What we have seen, in fact, is that social media, in the hands of the computer-savvy masses, is capable of circumventing government control and censorship. In many countries, social media is an alternative to state-controlled media such as the television and newspapers. On 13th July 2010, following escalating protests against the Iranian regime of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, social media networks were alive with activity with 'live' updates on the uprisings. In contrast, newspapers carried blank frontlines following a white-out by the government. Social media has allowed for the voices of the masses to be heard in places where a totalitarian government reigns. A totalitarian government imposes its rule by controlling the consensus worldview of the masses – it is, in other words, a monologue by the government. Social media has liberalised the political scene by enabling the responses of the people to be heard. This can also be seen in Tunisia where information about the uprising against President El Abidine Ben Ali was broadcast to the rest of the world through blogs and political websites, with the international media drawing on such resources rather than the official state media. Arab network Al-Jazeera was also able to broadcast this information back into Tunisia. The use of social media here has proved to be very effective in circumventing the government's stranglehold on information, and in organising grassroots protests. As such, we see that social media has changed the face of politics by allowing for the uprisings of previously political suppressed masses.

Furthermore, social media has allowed for greater ease of engagement in politics by the general public as opposed to limited channels such as newspapers and radio. Social media highlights the input of information by individuals, and as such, is an effective channel through which the opinions and thoughts of the public can be expressed. This can be seen during the 2011 General Election in Singapore where political websites such as The Online Citizen and Temasek Review ran commentaries and discussions of the election by the public. This is in contrast to the mainstream media, which tends to be for the dissemination of information and remains a limited platform controlled by a central authority. With greater inducement from the people, the government has been forced to be on its toes and to respond more effectively to the concerns and demands of the masses. For instance, following the General Election, the Singapore government was quick to respond to concerns of the people through a series of radical changes in the Cabinet and a review of the salaries of Cabinet Ministers. As such, social media has enhanced involvement of the people, eliciting responsiveness and accountability by the government.

Lastly, social media has allowed the masses to interact with politicians on a more personal basis, allowing politics to be conducted on a more intimate level. It serves to humanise politicians as we have seen in the political scene of Singapore where Cabinet Ministers have had greater involvement in social media outlets, posting personal information and thoughts on sites such as Twitter and Facebook, which allows for the public to better understand and identify with them. This General Election was also a landmark one as we saw the Prime Minister engaging voters for the first time on social media. As such, social media has personalised and humanised the process of politics.

Marker's comments:

Excellent range of examples, beyond Singapore. There was more than a trace of confidence shown in this paper. You were able to present complex issues in a crisp and fluent way and always within reasonable sense of economy. An enjoyable and thoughtful read. A pity you did not have time to conclude your essay properly.

General Paper Year 5 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 34

Education has resulted in only more inequality. Do you agree?

Kwek Mu Yi Theophilus | 12A01B

Throughout the course of human history, the power of education to empower the disempowered and strengthen the weak has not gone unnoticed. Long hailed as the "great social equaliser", education has also been described by H.G. Wells as an essential part of society and the human race's only alternative to "catastrophe".

In this day and age, however, there is some indication that education – here defined as a formal system for the teaching and learning of information and skills (including literacy and numeracy) – has only succeeded in "more inequality", both in the sense of exacerbating current divides between peoples of different backgrounds, and in the sense of creating new divisions between the educated and the uneducated. This essay will demonstrate that such instances of "more inequality" are due to the unequal implementation of education, rather than education itself, and that education continues to fulfil its purpose as a social equaliser around the world today.

There is no denying that the enhanced personal ability and social mobility granted to the educated have set them apart from the uneducated; if this were not the case, then the entire concept of education as a mode of empowerment would be null and void. It is no accident that two-thirds of the world's illiterate are concentrated in eight developing nations, some of which also see the world's lowest economic growth – such as in Ethiopia and Pakistan. Clearly, the skills imparted to those in well-performing nations have not only improved their lot in life, but bettered the situation of their nations as a whole. With more resources, these nations are then able to invest in better education systems, which further boost their economies, and over time, a divide is created between the rich, educated nations and the uneducated poor.

Within many developed nations, the education system is also designed to bring students who do well to a level of "higher" education: secondary or tertiary as the case may be. And in many cases, it is the rich who are able to afford the best education for their children from a young age, allowing them to easily obtain higher education while the poor are left behind. In this sense, within societies, education also amplifies existing divides between those who rise quickly through the system, and those who are, economically or otherwise, disadvantaged.

The problem here, though, is one of unequal distribution and implementation of education. If education of the same quality were made accessible to all, in each and every nation around the world, the above situations would not exist: all members of society would be equally empowered to change their socio-economic positions, and to pull their families (and communities) out of their current plight. But this is not logistically possible in today's world: insufficient infrastructure, ineffective legislation and deep-seated ways of life are all obstacles to the equal implementation of formal education around the world.

Taking a broader perspective, this is not to say that improvements have not been made. Within the last century, the world's literacy rate (defined as the percentage of people above 15 who can read and write) has risen to 82%, a figure unimaginable even for "developed" European societies in the past. And according to the CIA World Factbook, the world's school-life expectancy (or, the number of years one can expect to receive formal education) has risen to 11 years, which is higher than in some developed nations today (Singapore's, for example, is 10.1 years). While the implementation of education has not been perfect thus far, the world is certainly seeing advancements on this front – doubtless a factor for its rising economic performance.

This power of education to create change can be attributed, among education's many functions, to two main points. Both deal with solving the problem of inequality, and they are, namely, eradicating

illiteracy and innumeracy, and imparting the ability to understand and invoke one's rights.

The twin disabilities of illiteracy and innumeracy have trapped many around the world in what Amartya Sen describes as the "certainty of depravity". Being unable to read, write and count from a young age effectively disconnects one from the information available in today's world, and disqualifies one from white-collar jobs – and increasingly, blue-collar jobs as well – in any society. The limited stations in life available to one from this point represent a restricted social mobility, and a permanently lowered personal capacity. It is also profoundly difficult for the illiterate to obtain access to sanitation and healthcare later in their lives, and this is a key factor in the higher mortality rates of the uneducated. Education provides people with the basic skills required to move ahead in today's world, without which little or no progress – both individual and societal – can be made.

The other key purpose of education, with regard to inequality, is to give people the ability to understand and invoke their rights. As Robert Frost once wrote, education creates a populace that is "easy to govern, but impossible to enslave". In other words, it gives people awareness of the freedoms they are entitled to, and how to go about obtaining them. The capacity to understand and invoke one's rights is the first step towards gaining political and social representation for one's community, without which concrete changes cannot be made (in the field of education or elsewhere) to bring society forward. In this function, education now serves as a means of empowerment, by giving the disadvantaged the necessary pre-conditions to better their lives, and the lives of those around them.

Examples abound of places where education has fulfilled these two ends remarkably well, vastly reducing inequality and creating prosperity for whole nations. Japan is one such example. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, many resources were devoted to education and re-education, such that by 1913, the Asian nation was printing twice as many books as the United States. Although at that stage Japan was still vastly underdeveloped, and had a wide rich-poor divide, it was soon able to become the leading economy in Asia, and actually embark on an imperialist programme of its own in 1939. Singapore too, provides us with an example of education's power as a social equaliser. At the point of independence, Singapore was still a backward colony that depended on external trade for its revenue. More than half the local population were uneducated and lived in slums or farms around the island. The past four decades, though have seen tremendous improvements in the education system, and corresponding economic prosperity. Singapore now boasts a 95.9% literacy rate, and is home to the top feeder school in the world for the Ivy League universities. At the same time, Singapore has achieved the world's fourth highest GDP, and 74.4% of Singaporean households live in 4-room flats, larger apartments, or private property.

In both these case studies, the effects of education in reducing inequality – both for individuals and for the entire nation – are self-evident. While it has been acknowledged that unequal implementation of education in some parts of the world has led to greater inequality, this writer sees it as a confirmation of education's potential to change the lot of those who benefit from it. Education's overall results around the world today are testament to its power to reduce inequality by the twin means of eradicating illiteracy and promoting rights awareness, and thus, all things considered, it would be unfair to conclude that "education has resulted in only more inequality".

Marker's comments:

A refreshing big-picture approach to the question – I have enjoyed this response and have also learnt much from it! Well done!

An effective total refutation of given statement. Can it be true though, that all things being unequal (rich and poor children have different opportunities and resources, so people are not "equal" to begin with), even the same education results in "greater inequality"? Go for some 'balance' as well, Theophilus!