Unit Overview

When historians write the history of the twenty-first century, their work will focus on the events and decisions made by influential leaders, but their interpretation will also include those factors which have changed the ways in which we live, work and interact. For example, mass communication, environmentalism, human rights and management of health crises are very significant. This is because they make the world appear smaller on a daily basis.
The Effects of Mass Communication

By 1900, a series of developments in technology had given the world the motion picture, the radio, the telephone and the Kodak camera. With the introduction of the transistor radio to the international market in the 1950s, even isolated villages in developing nations could receive information. These small, portable devices offered governments a powerful tool for both education and propaganda. Although less pervasive in the more remote regions of the world, the television set also became a global entity. Political groups soon recognized the impact of leader’s image. State-run television networks became a source of national pride for many countries. At the same, it pictured high standards of living and often promoted Western materialism.

Colossus: Early Computer Built in 1940

The most dynamic force underlying the communication revolution was Apple’s introduction of the first personal computers in 1976. An explosive growth in mass communication immediately followed. New technologies developed so rapidly that products were sometimes obsolete before they hit the market. The first cell phones arrived in 1985. This development removed the obstacle of running
traditional telephone lines to acquire service. For example, Africa now has
millions of cell phone users in regions where running land-lines had been
impractical or nearly impossible. Even areas with no electrical service were able
to take advantage of this technology. As a result, cell phones have become one of
the most widely owned consumer products in the world.

The Internet, or World Wide Web, has also had a profound impact on human
communication. Made available to the general public in 1994, it offered the global
population instantaneous communication through email and immediate access to
information on every topic. Social media brought to the forefront a forum where
anything could be discussed or debated. Large corporations and small businesses
took advantage of the ever-growing trend to e-commerce and provided an amazing
number of products and services. For repressive governments, however, the
Internet proved to be a threat to authoritarian control. North Korea and China
have spent millions to restrict the flow of information via the Internet. This type of
censorship, however, has proven very difficult to enforce. Unfortunately,
cybercrime has also grown with the increasing dependency on the Internet. It
covers a wide variety of criminal activity online. Phishing scams and identity
theft have compromised the bank accounts and credit ratings of millions of average Internet users. On a larger scale, corporations and government agencies have been victimized by hackers. They are responsible for stealing massive amounts of data and intellectual property. In 2014, for example, North Korea ordered a cyberattack on the Sony Corporation in response to a film that spoofed an assassination attempt on that country’s leader. Although it is difficult to estimate, some researchers have calculated that cybercrime accounts for a global loss of $575 million annually.

STOP: Answer Section B Questions

Environmental Concerns

Concerns about the impact of industrialization, urbanization and economic development on the environment has existed since the Industrial Revolution began. During the era of European shipbuilding in the eighteenth century, there were those who voiced apprehension over the destruction of the forests and its effect on the land. In the United States, the first national park was established in the nineteenth century. The Sierra Club, one America’s most active environmental organizations, was founded in 1892. However, the modern environmental movement gained momentum with the publication of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring in 1962. It told the story of a fictional town where the arrival of spring did not include the customary signs associated with the season. The trees did not blossom, chicks did not hatch and the litters of farm animals were unusually small. Carson related these events to the use of insecticides like DDT. This chemical compound had been used extensively in the 1950s to combat malaria-carrying mosquitos. Although the work alerted people to the danger of common chemicals, the banning of DDT caused malaria to make a deadly comeback. For the global community, this illustrated that the protection of the environment would have advantages and disadvantages.
By the 1980’s, environmentalism had expanded to include campaigns for injustices. There were also greater demands for the consistent enforcement of laws with equal protection from hazardous materials. One of the most significant examples of environmental injustice occurred in Bhopal, India. On the night of December 3, 1984, thousands of people died from poisonous gases that escaped from an industrial site. This happened because the facility’s safety alarms were not working. Following the abandonment of the plant, toxic chemicals continued to pollute the local water supply. The Indian Supreme Court eventually ordered a cleanup of the site by Union Carbide, the American corporation responsible for the disaster.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, environmentalists were especially alarmed about the increase in global temperatures over time. They worked to alert the public on the dangers of global warming. As humans burned more fossil fuels, they released massive amounts of hydrocarbons and created a greenhouse effect. Special interest groups warned of the catastrophic results of rising sea levels, abnormal weather patterns and the destruction of the earth’s ozone layer. This encouraged the United Nations to add a provision called the Kyoto Protocol to its United Nations Framework Convention in 1997. Over 170 countries, a group that does not include the United States, have ratified the protocol and have volunteered to reduce their emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.
Human Rights for Women and Children

Since 1945, significant progress has been made in improving the status of both human and civil rights. The end of apartheid in South Africa and the passage of civil rights legislation in the United States represent positive achievements in this area. However, much remains to be done, especially in respect to people of color, women and children. The degree of inequality experienced by women varies around the world. In the industrialized nations of the West, women define equality in terms of salaries on par with those of their male counterparts and fair competition for executive positions. At the same time, women in some developing countries are still working for the right to vote.

The state of women living in extremely poor conditions has been termed the **feminization of poverty**. Overall, two out of every three adults living in poverty are women. Because they are primarily responsible for childcare in many cultures, females have fewer opportunities for employment. Their options are also limited by discrimination, a lack of education and policies legislated by male-dominated governments. Violence against women remains a major issue across the globe. Although rape has been labeled as a crime against humanity, it remains a weapon
of war. Recent statistics compiled for domestic violence show increases in Russia, Pakistan and South Africa. In some regions, women are killed by male relatives for bringing dishonor to the family. Evidence of female slave trafficking has been uncovered in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia. There are, however, notable signs of progress. More women are being elected to high-ranking political positions and more girls than ever before are receiving educations.

Children, too, suffer from inadequate guarantees for human rights. It has been estimated that 1 billion boys and girls around the world live in poverty. Many do not have adequate shelter, clean drinking water or access to healthcare. Over 10 million children die every year before reaching the age of five. They are recruited as soldiers, forced to work as laborers and kidnapped as part of sex trafficking rings. In 1989, the United Nations responded by issuing the Convention on the Rights of a Child. This document has been amended several times and includes provisions condemning the use of children in military conflict, the sale of children and child pornography. Much of the work of documenting and resolving these issues is performed by the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund, a U.N. agency referred to as UNICEF. Although it is often criticized for not accomplishing enough, a decline in infant mortality rates and an increase in
school enrollments within the regions where it serves are examples of UNICEF’s success. A deadly terrorist attack on a school in Pakistan in December of 2014, however, emphasizes just how difficult it is to ensure the safety of children in the twenty-first century.

STOP: Answer Section D Questions

Managing Infectious Diseases

Infectious diseases have been a part of human history since the New Stone Age, or Neolithic Period. One of the most famous wiped out one-third of Europe’s population in the 1300s. Known as the Black Death, it spread from China westward along the Silk Road. A serious outbreak of influenza also occurred in 1918 just as World War I ended. It resulted in the deaths of millions of people in Europe, Asia, North America and the South Pacific. Health professionals began to refer to infections that spread over several continents as pandemics.

In 1949, the World Health Organization (WHO), an agency of the United Nations was established. Today, it monitors disease activity around the world and issues warnings to the public. This organization is also responsible for deciding when an illness has reached pandemic proportions. In spite of medical breakthroughs and effective vaccines, new diseases continue to emerge. In March of 2020, WHO declared the COVID 19 virus as pandemic because it had rapidly made its way to six of the seven continents.

STOP: Answer Section E Questions

What Does It All Mean?

The study of world history marks a series of dramatic contrasts for the human race. There have been remarkable achievements against overwhelming odds and failures with tragic consequences. It is this process that has set the stage for tomorrow’s history.
Additional Resources and Activities

Main Points Worksheet

What is Environmental Justice Article with Quiz

Writing Exercises: Science and Technology