

The Internet and Youth Culture

Gustavo S. Mesch

Since the internet and other media have been adopted and integrated into the daily lives of an increasing number of young adolescents in Western countries, scholars and commentators are debating the impact of these new media on the activities, social relationships, and worldviews of the younger generations. Controversies about whether technology shapes values, attitudes, and patterns of social behavior are not new. In the recent past, the rapid expansion of television stimulated similar discussions of its cultural and social effects. In this essay, I will briefly describe the sources of the debate and its specific arguments regarding the role of the internet in youth life. Then, I will describe some important trends in youth activities, attitudes, and behaviors.

The literature on the internet and youth culture presents different views regarding the role of technology in society. Two major perspectives are technological determinism and the social construction of technologies.

Technological Determinism

The technological deterministic view presents the internet as an innovative force that has profound influence on children and youth; technology generates new patterns of expression, communication, and motivation. In this view, various terms have been used to describe this generation of youth, including “Net-generation,” the “millennium generation,” and “digital natives.”¹ These labels attempt to identify a large group of young adolescents who grew up during the expansion of the internet and from early childhood have

¹ Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1,” *On the Horizon* 9.5 (October 2001): 1–6; Don Tapscott, *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1998).

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been immersed in a media-rich environment, using computers, playing online games, constantly communicating and connecting with their friends by electronic devices. These youth create and use digital spaces for social interaction, identity expression, and media production and consumption.

Supporting this perspective, scholars of media consumption have described adolescents' lives as being characterized by media privatization in a multimedia environment.² In Western societies, young people's cultural consumption includes a large number of media artifacts such as television sets, VCRs, landline and cell phones, video games, compact disc players, MP3 players, and computers. Over time, households tend to acquire more than one media item. Adolescents appropriate the media, and more and more media tools move from the public spaces of the household to private places, from the living room to the bedrooms, accumulating in the teenager's room. Youth are described as having created a bedroom culture that facilitates their media consumption without parental supervision or limitation.

Acting in a media-rich environment and a bedroom culture, the Net-generation or digital natives express different values, attitudes, and behaviors than previous generations. These digital natives are described as optimistic, team-oriented achievers who are talented with technology. Immersion in this technology-rich culture influences the skills and interests of teens in important ways. According to this view, they think and process information differently from their predecessors, are active in experimentation, are dependent on information technologies for searching for information and communicating with others, and are eager to acquire skills needed to develop creative multimedia presentations and to become multimedia producers and not merely consumers.³ Simply put, the argument is that the internet has created a new generation of young people who possess sophisticated knowledge and skills with information technologies, express values that support learning by experience and the creation of a culture in a digital space, and have particular learning and social preferences.

The notion of a Net-generation is consistent with a deterministic view of the effect of technology on society. Technological determinism views technology as an independent force that drives social change.⁴ Technology itself exercises causal influence on social practices, and technological change induces changes in social organization and culture regardless of the social desirability of the change.

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² Sonia Livingstone, Leen d'Haenens, and Uwe Hasebrink, "Childhood in Europe: Contexts for Comparison," *Children and Their Changing Media Environment: A European Comparative Study*, ed. Sonia Livingstone and Moira Bovill (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001) 3–31.

³ See Tapscott; Prensky.

⁴ Bruce Bimber, "Three Faces of Technological Determinism," *Does Technology Drive History?: The Dilemma of Technological Determinism*, ed. Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) 79–100.



The Social Construction of Technologies

This view has created controversy, as others remind us that information and communication technologies are not forces that homogenize young people into a single entity with unique characteristics. Technology is an inherent part of society; it is created by social actors. According to a social construction of technology approach, it is important to note that social groups differ in the extent of their access to technology, their skills, and the meanings they associate with technology. The same technology can have different meanings for different social groups of users. Technologies can and do have a social impact, but they are simultaneously social products that embody power relationships and social goals and structures.⁵ Thus technological changes are a process and do not have a single direction.

Understanding the place of the internet in the lives of young individuals requires avoiding a purely deterministic interpretation and recognizing the social embeddedness of technology and its variable outcomes.⁶ The internet can be constitutive of new cultural features of young social life, but it can also reproduce older conditions. A purely deterministic approach ignores the material conditions and the social environment within which, and through which, these technologies operate. Digital spaces such as social networking sites, weblogs (blogs), and clip and photo sharing are owned by commercial companies that target youth and try to shape their consumption patterns.

At the same time, when using these spaces, youth are becoming empowered in different social aspects. First, they are able to overcome the limitations of geography by reaching out to others according to specific interests and not only by virtue of residential similarity. Second, they take an important role in society as co-producers of internet content and reach out with their innovative presentations to large and global audiences.

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The Internet as Culture and as Cultural Artifact

In part, the discrepancy between technological determinism and the view of technology as socially constructed is the result of a lack of clarity about the subject of study.

⁵ Merritt Roe Smith, *Military Enterprise and Technological Change: Perspectives on the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

⁶ Saskia Sassen, "Towards a Sociology of Information Technology," *Current Sociology* 50:3 (2002): 365–88.

In this respect, it is useful to distinguish between the internet as culture and the internet as a cultural artifact.⁷

To study the internet as a culture means to regard it as a social space in its own right, exploring the forms of consumption and content production, and the patterns of online communication and social interaction, expression, and identity formation that are produced within this digital social space, as well as how they are sustained by the resources available within the online setting. In this sense, online activity is conceived as different and even separate from one's offline activity, having a life of its own, usually separated from real life as a parallel reality of the participating individuals. When studied independently, the virtual space is a coherent social space that exists entirely

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within a computer space, and in which new rules and ways of being can emerge. Thus, youth operating within an online community may be geographically dispersed, experiencing different hours of the day in different locales, but they share an identical interest, virtual space and rules, shared activities, and a common sense of belonging. Being online not only detaches individuals from the constraints imposed by location, but also frees them from the constraints associated with

their offline personalities and social roles. Youth have an opportunity to express online their "real" or inner selves, using the relative anonymity of the internet to be the person they want to be and experimenting with their identity and self.⁸

The internet is often used to express unexplored aspects of the self and to create a virtual persona. Cyberspace becomes a place to "act out" unresolved conflicts, to play and replay difficulties, to work on significant personal issues. Sherry Turkle summarizes this position: "We can use the virtual to reflect constructively on the real. Cyberspace opens the possibility for identity play, but it is very serious play."⁹

This approach has methodological implications. Conceiving of the internet as an object of study means studying only the virtual persona; online communication; and online social norms, rules, and etiquettes, without considering the other direction, namely how established social norms and values are being reflected in the online world. The internet has been hailed for the possibilities it is perceived to offer its users of escaping the constraints of their material surroundings and bodies, enabling them to create and play with online identities.¹⁰ In these terms, the human body is regarded not only as invisible online, but also as temporarily suspended, so that it becomes partially or completely irrelevant. Similarly, in this perspective, internet communication creates new forms of social relationships, in which participants are no longer bound by the

⁷ Christine Hine, "Internet Research and the Sociology of Cyber-Social-Scientific Knowledge," *The Information Society* 21 (September 2005): 239–48.

⁸ John A. Bargh and Katelyn Y. A. McKenna, "The Internet and Social Life," *Annual Review of Psychology* 55 (2004): 573–90.

⁹ Sherry Turkle, "Cyberspace and Identity," *Contemporary Sociology* 28:6 (1999): 643–8.

¹⁰ Sadie Plant, "On the Matrix: Cyberfeminism Simulations," *Cultures of the Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*, ed. Rob Shields (London: Sage, 1996) 170–83.

need to meet others face to face but can expand their social arena by meeting others, located anywhere in the online universe, mind to mind. Thus, virtual relationships are seen as more intimate, richer, and more liberating than offline relationships because they are based on genuine mutual interest rather than the coincidence of physical proximity. It is a zone of freedom, fluidity, and experimentation insulated from the mundane realities of the material world.¹¹

An alternative view is to see the internet as a cultural artifact, an object immersed in a social context, considering how the technology is incorporated in the everyday life of individuals and how it is used as a means of communication, expression, and content production within an offline social world.¹² This perspective rejects the dematerialization of social life that results from adopting a perspective that looks at the internet as a culture in itself. Much of what happens in electronic space is deeply inflected by the offline culture—the material practices and imaginaries that take place outside the electronic space. Digital spaces are not exclusive conditions that stand outside the nondigital. Digital space is embedded in the larger societal, cultural, subjective, economic, and imaginary constructions of lived experience and the systems within which we exist and operate.¹³

Conceiving of the new digital space as socially embedded allows us to go beyond the duality between technological determinism and the social construction of technology. For example, this approach allows us to understand that adolescents use the internet for the creation of unique social spaces in which they can use instant messaging and social networking sites to sustain their friendships, but they can also overcome the geographical limitations of association. They can access others who share their concerns and interests and do not belong to their immediate social group. In doing this, they are accessing new social networks and novel information resources and opportunities. Social disadvantage creates restrictions in access to networks and to the resources that the internet might offer. At the same time, as studies have shown, most of the use of Instant Messenger (IM) and social networking sites is to maintain existing social ties with similar others.

The view of the internet as a cultural tool calls attention to the material sources of social life, as socio-economic status limits access, skills, and participation in the virtual world. Thus, the internet is seen not as generating a new online world but as mostly

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¹¹ See Bargh and McKenna 573–90.

¹² James E. Katz and Ronald E. Rice, “Syntopia: Access, Civic Involvement, and Social Interaction on the Net,” *The Internet in Everyday Life*, ed. Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) 114–38.

¹³ See Sassen 365–88; Susan C. Herring, “Questioning the Generational Divide: Technological Exoticism and Adult Constructions of Online Youth Identity,” *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, ed. David Buckingham, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007) 71–92.

reflecting the existing conditions of society; individuals use the internet to do old things in new ways, expanding the possibilities of communication among individuals who know each other and are linked by friendship, kinship, or other types of relationship. The internet is recognized as a new channel of communication, but its function is limited to supplementing the existing ones (face-to-face interaction and phone calls) and in some cases displacing them.¹⁴ Most fundamentally, existing characteristics of relationships are instrumental and central in determining which channels to use and when. Strong ties communicate using all the channels; weak ties use only some of them.¹⁵ The emphasis in this view is on the actor; the integration of the internet into existing relationships reflects the actor's rational choices in maintaining existing social ties. In the same vein, the conception of an internet generation has been rejected as a mere expansion of an adult discourse that reflects the difficulties and fears of adults to achieve digital literacy. Youth have incorporated IM, blogs, information search, and commerce into their lives, using them as additional technological tools to conduct the same activities that youth have always carried on.¹⁶

The integration of the internet in the everyday life of youth means that both views need to be integrated. Rather than expecting causation, we need to be tuned to the mutual influences. Adolescents use the internet to accomplish important developmental tasks such as identity formation, social interaction, and the development of autonomy. The internet is being used to conduct these developmental tasks, and, at the same time, through its use, it is having an effect on their culture that in certain dimensions looks different than that of the previous generation.

When looking at the internet culture, one important development is a shift in the association between youth and media. Youth today are active participants in the creation of media content. The advent of Web 2.0 increases the ability of youth not only to be passive consumers of information and content online, but also to become active creators and contributors. The lower costs of coordinating creative efforts and distributing materials allow individuals to generate their own content and to collaborate with others in social, economic, and political activities. Social media platforms facilitate various ad-hoc and formal, small as well as large-scale online communities, where User-Generated-Content (UGC) flourishes: bloggers post news and analysis, independent musicians distribute their music (*MySpace*), and amateur photographers post their photos (*Flickr*), or distribute their videos (*You Tube*). Thus, youth today are actively involved in web production and tend to appropriate portions of it and to convert them into youth zones. Teens also produce unique, stand-alone content for the web, such as blogs, that allow for a more interactive dialog. Blogs represent a kind of diary that is shared with a larger audience that refers to the details of their everyday life (daily concerns, thoughts,

¹⁴ Nancy K. Baym, Yan Bing Zhang, and Mei-Chen Lin, "Social Interactions across Media: Interpersonal Communication on the Internet, Telephone and Face-to-Face," *New Media & Society* 6:3 (2004): 299–318.

¹⁵ Caroline Haythornthwaite, "Strong, Weak and Latent Ties and the Impact of New Media," *The Information Society* 18:5 (2002): 385–401.

¹⁶ See Herring 71–92.

and emotions), consumer talk, and television and movie critiques. As such, blogs are a popular way to build identity and socialize in an information-based society.

Yet, as I have mentioned before, it would be a mistake to think that all youth are engaged in content production and share the same digital culture. For the large majority of adolescents, the internet is being used mostly for another important developmental task: relationship formation and maintenance with their existing friends. Adolescence is an important developmental stage. During this period social relationships outside the family expand, and their quality has been linked to various behavioral outcomes. Social interaction with peers provides a forum for learning and refining socio-emotional skills needed for enduring relationships. Through interactions with peers, adolescents learn how to cooperate, to take different perspectives, and to satisfy growing needs for intimacy.¹⁷ In the last ten years, the communication environment of youth has changed as more and more teens have access to computer-mediated communication and cellular phones. The most frequent youth use of the internet remains for social purposes, as 93 percent send and receive emails, 68 percent send and receive instant messages, and 55 percent have a profile in a social networking site. Only 28 percent create or work in an online journal (blog), and 18 percent visit chat rooms.¹⁸

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Youth social life is conducted both online and offline, and their overlap is leading to perpetual communication with peers. When coming home from school, youth continue to be in contact with their school and remote friends through IM and social networking sites. This continuous contact provides a sense of copresence, of being together with others in a mediated—either remote or virtual—environment. Conversations that started at school continue after school through mediated connections of IM, emails, and social networking sites. The primary purposes of IM are informal talk and socializing. Since IM communicators usually know each other and often share experiences, the nature of their conversations is reported to be much like those they have in the face-to-face space: reflections on their day's events, gossip about others, including what clothes were worn and who was seen with whom. IM is often used as an efficient channel to enable multiple social network members to coordinate face-to-face meetings. In this respect, an interesting behavior is micro-coordination. A new but fast growing communication channel is short message service (SMS). SMS is used for "micro-coordination," a concept that refers to the instrumental use of IM and mobile phones to coordinate a meeting by allowing individuals to adjust and readjust in real time the time and place

¹⁷ Kenneth H. Rubin, William M. Bukowski, and Jeffrey G. Parker, "Peer Interactions, Relationships, and Groups," *Handbook of Child Psychology: Social, Emotional, and Personality Development*, ed. Nancy Eisenberg (New York: Wiley, 2006) 571–645.

¹⁸ Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden, "Teens, Privacy & Online Social Networks: Managing Online Identities and Personal Information in the Age of MySpace," Pew Internet & American Life Project (18 April 2007): <<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/454/teens-privacy--online-social-networks>>.

of meeting.¹⁹ Rather than setting a fixed time and place, youth converge in real time to a common location.

Social networking sites have additional features; they allow users to present information about themselves (such as age, gender, location, education, and interests); encourage users to link to known and likeminded others whose profiles exist in the site or to invite known and likeminded individuals to join the site; and enable users to establish and maintain contact with other users, to post content, create personal blogs, and participate in online groups. Besides the communication element, social network sites are sites for identity formation and experimentation. Most sites encourage users to construct accurate representations of themselves, but it is difficult to know to what extent individuals do so.

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The use of different social media to stay in contact all the time with peers has raised the question of how youth accommodate online participation with their busy schedules. With the extensive use of computers, multitasking has become part of the way teens manage a busy life. Media multitasking can be defined as engaging in more than one media activity at a time, switching constantly between such activities as email, IM, web search, and sending text messages to friends.²⁰ In other words, teens are switching back and forth between different activities. It is true that some multitasking existed in the past, with adolescents doing homework and listening to music at the same time, but now it has been expanded from media to social multitasking, conducting various conversations simultaneously with

different members of the peer group. In a comprehensive study on multitasking in the U.S., when youth were asked how often they use other media when using each of four media (reading newspapers, watching TV, using computers, and playing video games), it was found that about a quarter are multitasking most of the time, about half from time to time, and only 20 percent of the teens never multitask. From this preliminary study, it is clear that multitasking results from computer use. One central finding of the study was that multitasking is not common when the primary media being used is television. On the other hand, multitasking is very common when using the computer. When using email, 83 percent of the respondents reported simultaneously engaging in other media activity. When using IM, 75 percent reported doing this activity simultaneously with other media consumption. It is not surprising that when using the computer for any purpose, youth report simultaneously engaging in other computer-related activities. For example, when the computer is used for computer games, it is very likely that it is also being used for IM and phone conversations. When the computer is used

¹⁹ Richard Ling and Birgitte Yttri, "Hyper-coordination Via Mobile Phone in Norway," *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, ed. James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 139–69.

²⁰ Ulla G. Foehr, *Media Multitasking Among American Youth: Prevalence, Predictors and Pairings* (Menlo Park: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006).

for IM, it is very likely to be used simultaneously to search websites, watch television, and send email. Finally, when searching for websites, the most popular secondary activity is conducting IM conversations.²¹

What are the outcomes of perpetual contact, micro-coordination, and multitasking? These activities might create an image of youth who are socially overloaded, managing hundreds of contacts, and exposing themselves to the risks of contact with strangers. This image seems to be different from the behavior and views that teens report. Users are able to build a network of connections that they can display as a list of friends. These friends may be offline actual friends or acquaintances, or people they only know or have met online, and with whom they have no other link. A study in the U.S. found that 91 percent of all social networking teens say they use the sites to stay in touch with friends they see frequently, while 82 percent use the site to stay in touch with friends they rarely see in person, and 72 percent use the sites to make plans with their friends.²² In the U.K. the findings are similar, and while users reported massive numbers of individuals as “friends,” the actual number of close friends is approximately the same as face to face. The research found that although the sites allowed contact with hundreds of acquaintances, people tend to have around 5 close friends, and 90 percent of their contacts were people they had met face to face. Only 10 percent were contacts made with total strangers.²³ Social networking sites facilitate youth to update others about their activities and whereabouts, part of the culture of perpetual contact. Youth report that the number of individuals in their contact list is important because it is often used as an indication of social standing, the extent of being socially involved with others.²⁴

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The internet plays an important role in adolescent life as a cultural artifact and a culture in itself. It is important to recognize that adolescence is a developmental stage with some common characteristics and at the same time a socially nonhomogeneous group of individuals who adopt different components of the internet for different purposes. Rather than thinking of the internet in dichotomist terms, either reflecting social values and norms or generating a Net-generation, it is useful to think of constant interrelations that are being created, bridging and mutually affecting online and offline youth lives.

Youth adoption of the internet presents opportunities for participation in the information society. The most frequent use of the internet is for conducting social contact with family, friends, and acquaintances. For some adolescents, belonging to a peer group and participating in social activities are dependent on access. The social partici-

²¹ See Fochr.

²² See Lenhart and Madden.

²³ James Randerson, “Social Networking Sites Don’t Deepen Friendships,” *The Guardian* (10 September 2007): <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science2007/sept/10/socialnetwork>>.

²⁴ Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe, “The Benefits of Facebook ‘Friends’: Social Capital and College Students’ Use of Online Social Network Sites,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12:4 (2007): <<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue4/ellison.html>>.

pation of adolescents is shaped both by their developmental need for social association and the technological features of the internet. The need for social association explains why the majority of the contacts in Social Network Sites and IM are with friends from school. The features of the internet support the intensification of youth social life that is expressed in perpetual contact. The need to manage this perpetual contact leads to media and social multitasking—strategies that are needed to cope with perpetual contact with one's peer group.

A smaller group of adolescents are active participants in the production of web content and digital culture. Rejecting parental conceptions of privacy, youth are using commercial and noncommercial sites to express to a large and often unknown audience their identities, artistic creations, and everyday experiences. The expression of identity is a developmental need that is expressed in a digital space. Here again, the social meets technology and in this unique encounter creates a change in our conception of private and public space. Personal information about our feelings and whereabouts are published on the internet. The perception is that we are sharing experiences and emotions with our friends, when in fact they are being shared with an infinite audience. Thus, online spaces are being used as a continuation of everyday communication, to reflect on experiences at school and plan joint activities. At the same time, the online experience of conducting multiple activities and conversations with others is incorporated in the way youth approach daily life, and the boundaries between offline and online, public and private, are constantly being blurred, mutually affecting each other in various ways. These mutual effects are in need of more in-depth study and understanding.