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Whitepaper

State of the Internet for Youth

10/30/07

Overview

As much as it was reared on milk and bread, the baby boomer generation was raised on television. The generation that was born from 1946 to 1964 in countries that experienced a growth rate spike after World War II was the first in which television was "the institution that solidified the sense of generational identity more than any other."[1]

Those growing up in the current generation are focused on another box. In many ways, the computer, with its vital Internet connection, has supplanted the "idiot box" as the cultural focal point in the lives of many young people. It is where they communicate (via outrageously popular sites as MySpace and Facebook and Instant Messaging), express themselves and learn. Internet innovations have certainly embedded themselves into the lives of the new generation. This can pose a challenge for parents as the Internet does not come without risks.

"Adults generally parent the way they were parented. But parents are in a unique situation in that they're struggling with Internet safety, which is an issue their own parents never had to deal with," said Andrea Peach, an Edmonton Internet safety experts who manages the Alberta government's child sexual exploitation unit.[2]

According to a 2007 Symantec poll conducted by Harris Interactive, 88 per cent of parents in the United States are concerned about keeping their children safe online. The survey of 2,246 adults between June 11 and June 13 showed 76 per cent of parents are worried about their children receiving solicitations or inappropriate content.[3]

The challenge for parents is how to take their worries and take action. A key aspect of this is identifying how young people are using the Internet and the risks.

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[1] Gillon, Steve (2004) *Boomer Nation: The Largest and Richest Generation Ever, and How It Changed America*, Free Press, "Introduction"

[2] "The Internet age gap," The Edmonton Journal, by Shawn Ohler, June 18, 2007
[3] "There She Is… Miss America, For Online Child Safety," by K.C. Jones, InformationWeek.com, posted June 20, 2007, 1:18 p.m.

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Ingrained into their lives

One measure of how important the Internet, especially social networking sites, have become in the lives of young people is that some actually give it up for Lent. Catholics and others who observe the 40-day period from Ash Wednesday to Easter often sacrifice something they enjoy to show religious devotion. It corresponds to the 40 days and 40 nights that, according to the Bible, Jesus was fasting and resisting temptation in the wilderness.

"I realized how much time I was spending on the Internet," said Jocelyn Chiu, an Emory University (Atlanta, Ga.) student and Presbyterian church member, who only allowed herself to use the Internet to check her official school email account. "I needed to make myself focus on schoolwork more."[4]

Emily Montgomery, 16, decided to give up MySpace for Lent. She estimated that before she gave it up she was logging on at least four times a day and spending a total of about two hours on the site.

"Some of my friends think it's silly, since people usually give up food," she said. "I wanted to give up something that was really hard for me."

In its place, Montgomery turned to Facebook. She said the social networking site allowed her to "feel connected." MySpace and Facebook are the two largest Internet social networking sites. In February of 2005, MySpace had 64.4 million unique visitors, according to comScore Networks, an online measurement firm. During the same timeframe, Facebook drew 23.6 visitors. [4]

Both sites allow members to create profiles and add each other as "friends." You can post messages, photos, videos and personal blogs. MySpace and YouTube, a video sharing site, are places where people plug into "culture."

Many bands give fans a chance to hear new music through their MySpace pages. For example, female rock band The Donnas streamed their new song "Don't Wait Up For Me" via their MySpace account in the spring of 2007, even though a full album is still in the works.[5] When Canadian rock/folk/pop duo Tegan and Sara learned tracks from their July 24 The Con release had leaked onto the Internet more than a month early they posted two new songs on their MySpace page.[6]

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[4] "Students give up social networks for Lent," by Kate Hawkins, CNN.com, posted March 29, 2007, 9:39 a.m.
[5] "Rock Band The Donnas Take Control After Stumble," Reuters, June 24, 2007, 9:01 a.m.
[6] "Tegan and Sara drop 'The Con,'" by Julie Bolcer, AfterEllen.com, June 24, 2007

YouTube has also made stars out of people posting their videos. For example former boy bander turned solo superstar Justin Timberlake signed Dutch singer Esmee Denters, 18, to his new label after videos of her singing became favourites on YouTube. Over nine months, 21 million people watched her YouTube clips.[7]

Getting back to Chiu giving up the Internet, the fact she had to allow herself to check an email account shows how ingrained into culture and education the Internet and computers have become. In the 1990s it is estimated the Internet grew by 100 per cent per year. This rapid increase was due to both the exponential increase in the number of users and increased usage by current users.[8]

During the 1990s, "computers in the classroom" went from one PC collecting dust at the back of a room to being a learning essential at some higher education institutions. In 1993, the University of Minnesota – Crookston became the first laptop university in the United States. All students and faculty were issued laptops. Acadia University in Wolfville, N.S., became Canada's first laptop university in 1996. North Dakota's Mayville State University took the concept further in 2004 when it became America's first tablet PC university. All full-time, on-campus students receive a notebook-style computer.

Computers and the Internet have also drastically changed the idea that you must be in a classroom to learn. According to a 2005 study, e-learning is a 38 billion euros (about 52 billion USD) world-wide industry.[9] A Sloan Consortium report showed that more than 1.9 million students were studying online in 2003.[10] In 2005, the consortium released a report concluding online education was now part of mainstream higher education. Sixty-five per cent of schools that have the more conventional, face-to-face graduate courses also offer classes online. As for undergraduate classes, 63 per cent of institutions with face-to-face faces also have online offerings.[11] Canada's Athabasca University in Athabasca, AB., focuses solely on distance education with the Internet being a key component to most courses.

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[7] "Justin Timberlake signs YouTube star to new record label," by Caroline McCarthy, CNET.com, posted June 6, 2007, 5:50 a.m. PDT
[8] Coffman, K. G; Odlyzko, A. M. (1998-10-02). "The size and growth rate of Internet". AT&T Labs.
[9] Nagy, A. (2005). The Impact of E-Learning, in: Bruck, P.A.; Buckkolz, A.; Karssen, Z.; Zerfass, A. (Eds). E-Content: Technologies and Perspectives for the European Market. Berlin: Springer-Verlag, pp.79-96

[10] Entering the Mainstream: The Quality and Extent of Online Education in the United States, 2003 and 2004
[11] Growing by Degrees: Online Education in the United States, 2005

Do parents know what is going on?

For years PSAs were aired asking "do you know where your children are?" In today's world, perhaps a better question is, "do you know what your children are clicking or typing?"

According to an American study by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, many parents would answer that question with a "yes." The study, which surveyed 1,008 U.S. parents of children 2-17 in October 2006, stated 73 per cent said they know "a lot" about what their offspring are doing online (among all parents with children 9 or older who use the Internet at home). Sixty-five per cent of parents surveyed said they "closely" monitor their children's use of media, including television and the Internet. Only 18 per cent said they "should do more."

Of the parents of children who are online, 87 per cent said they check their child's Instant Messaging buddy lists. Eighty-two per cent say they view the social networking profiles the children post and 76 per cent say they check the web sites that have been viewed once the child is finished.[12] Some question the parents' confidence and diligence in keeping their children safe.

"Lots of previous studies show that most parents tell researchers that they carefully control their children's media use. But when you ask the kids, they tell a different story," said Dale Kunkel, a University of Arizona professor known for his research on media and on children.
"The kids report a much lower percentage of parents maintaining rules about media, and both sets of data can't be right."[13]

Young people are engaging in risky online behaviour, according to a study commissioned by Cox Communications and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. The survey, conducted in the U.S. in March 2007 with 1,070 teens between 13 and 17, showed 71 per cent of respondents had online profiles on sites such as MySpace. This is an increase of 10 per cent from a year ago.

The survey showed 69 per cent of teens receive messages online from a stranger. Thirty-one per cent of teens stated they generally reply to such messages and chat with the person. Only 21 per cent said they inform an adult when they receive such messages. Sixteen per cent of teens have considered meeting someone face-to-face that they had met online and 8 per cent said they actually have had such meetings.

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[12] Parents, Children & Media: A Kaiser Family Foundation Survey, June 19, 2007

[13] "Parents say they are in charge of kids' Internet, TV," by Mike Antonucci, San Jose Mercury News, June 20, 2007

Fifty-eight per cent of teens post information about where they live and 64 per cent put photos or videos of themselves online. Eight per cent of teens have put their cell phone number online.

Teens are not very concerned about making personal information available for all to see. Fifty-eight per cent said they didn't think putting photos or personal info online is unsafe. Forty-seven per cent said they are not concerned that their personal info will be used in ways they don't want.[14]

Unfortunately, there are people trolling social networking sites for young people. Lauren Nelson, Miss America 2007, had a personal experience with an online predator when she was 13.

"Some friends and I made the mistake of giving our names, ages, and locations to someone online, who we later discovered was a sexual predator. As a result we received inappropriate photographs from this person, and although the situation was defused without further incident, not all kids are as lucky."[15]

In the first two weeks of May, 2007, MySpace eliminated the profiles of about 7,000 registered sex offenders, according to a USA Today report. The same early June article quoted Mike Angus, chief counsel for MySpace and its parent company, Fox Interactive Media, stating more registered offenders have been purged since then. However, Angus declined to say how many more have had their profiles withdrawn.

There are about 600,000 registered sex offenders in the United States. The 7,000 or so initially identified represent slightly more than one per cent of the total, a TechNewsWorld report states. However, the identities and ages of MySpace users are not verified so there could be more offenders using the site. Last year MySpace contracted background verification company Sentinel Tech Holdings to create a national database of registered sex offenders. That database, called Sentinel SAFE, then was used to locate registered offenders among MySpace users and weed them out.

Teens are also using the Internet as a tool to engage in such activities as drug use. In a study funded by the Caron Treatment Centers, a non-profit

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[14] New Research Reveals Risky Internet Behavior Among Teens, but There are Encouraging Signs of Improvement with Increased Involvement of Parents and Guardians, Cox Communications, http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=76341&p=irol-newsArticle&t=Regular&id=998134&
[15] "There She Is… Miss America, For Online Child Safety," by K.C. Jones, InformationWeek.com, posted June 20, 2007, 1:18 p.m.

Pennsylvania program, teens use blogs, message boards and public chat rooms to communicate about drinking, smoking pot and engaging in sexual behaviour. The study, performed by Nielsen BuzzMetrics, found that in more than 10 million online message by teens about two per cent specifically mentioned drugs or alcohol.

In a USA Today story about the study, 18-year-old Ashley Duffy, who was treated at Caron, related she wrote freely about her drug use in her online journal and via the Internet contacted her dealer and found out about parties where people had drugs.

"Kids are really open about it. I see posts from other people describing a night on acid or whatever. I think they think their parents are clueless. And I guess they are."

The article stated teenagers use the Internet to find out about drugs – sometimes to disastrous outcomes. Lucky O'Donnell ended up in the intensive care unit shortly before his 17th birthday after his mother found him convulsing on the floor. He had mixed cocaine, Tylenol PM and alcohol after researching combinations online.
"One site said it was fine, one site said it wasn't. I wasn't able to differentiate the information. You want to believe everything you read."

Carol Falkowski is concerned about teens accessing misinformation about drugs online. She is the director of research communications for the Minnesota's Hazelden Foundation, an addiction treatment, education and research center.

"What kids used to learn about drugs on street corners, they now learn online. … Kids who live in remote areas can develop camaraderie online of drug-abusing kids. They can share stories about drug experiences."[16]

Even when teens are not actively seeking risky behaviour, trouble can find them via technology. About 10 per cent of Washington State teens have been victims of bullying, harassment or intimidation via a cell phone or the computer in "the last 30 days," according to a Health Youth Survey in that state.[17] While it might be online rather than face-to-face, cyberbullying can still be hurtful.

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[16] "Teens using internet to connect for drug talk," by Donna Leinwand, USA Today, June 19
[17] "Bullies move to cyberspace," by Josh Farley, Kitsap Sun, June 17, 2007

"Cyber-bullies don't know who they're talking to. They think it's just a screen and they don't care about the person on the other side," said Calvin Tee, a student at Singapore's Barker Road Anglo-Chinese School.[18]

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[18] "Schools implement programs to teach online etiquette," by Pearl Foss, Channel News Asia, June 25

Moving forward

While there are risks associated with teens and children using the Internet, a major factor in how safe it is for teens appears to be parental involvement. For example, according to the Cox Communications study, 48 per cent of teens whose parents have spoken to them about online safety do not post information about where they live. Sixty-five per cent of young people whose parents have not discussed Internet safety said they have put where they live online. Students with parents who have talked to them "a lot" about online safety are less likely to consider meeting face-to-face someone they have encountered online (12 per cent compared to 20 per cent).[19]

The deputy director the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy encourages parents to "crack the books" on Internet use and move computers into public rooms.

"It's a lot easier said than done, I know," Burns said. "As a parent, it's hard to keep up with your teens and their technologies. If you're not tech savvy, if you don't have Internet skills, you need to learn more."[20]

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[19] New Research Reveals Risky Internet Behavior Among Teens, but There are Encouraging Signs of Improvement with Increased Involvement of Parents and Guardians, Cox Communications, http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=76341&p=irol-newsArticle&t=Regular&id=998134&
[20] "Teens using internet to connect for drug talk," by Donna Leinwand, USA Today, June 19