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On the rapid rise of social networking sites: New findings and policy implications

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Abstract

Social networking sites have been rapidly adopted by children and, especially, teenagers and young people world wide, enabling new opportunities for the presentation of the self, learning, construction of a wide circle of relationships, and the management of privacy and intimacy. On the other hand, there are also concerns that social networking increases the likelihood of new risks to the self, these centring on loss of privacy, bullying, harmful contacts and more. This article reviews recent findings regarding children and teenagers' social networking practices in order to identify implications for future research and public policy. These focus on the interdependencies between opportunities and risks, the need for digital or media literacy education, the importance of building safety considerations into the design and management of social networking sites, the imperative for greater attention to 'at risk' children in particular, and the importance of a children's rights framework in developing evidence-based policy in this area.

Social networking among UK children and teenagers

Every few years, governments, the public and even technology providers are taken aback by the unexpected take up among young people of yet another innovation - email, chatrooms, texting, instant messaging, blogging and, recently, social networking sites. Public policy aspirations quickly capitalise on these youthful enthusiasms, seeking to revitalise agendas of informal education, health and lifestyle advice, and civic participation. Simultaneously, technological innovations afford the commercial world new possibilities for targeted and embedded marketing, while public policy is also required to address new online risks to children's wellbeing. This article reviews recent findings regarding children and teenagers' social networking practices in order to identify key recommendations for the future research and public policy.

Most social networking sites are intended for teenagers and adults, though some have no lower age limit and some target younger children. In 2007, 42% of UK 8-17 year olds had a social network profile, including 27% of 8-12 year olds and 55% of 13-17 year olds.¹ Similar figures hold in other countries, and use continues to grow worldwide, though it may have peaked in the USA and UK among young people (comScore, 2008). Ofcom's survey (2008) found that most users visit social networking sites daily or every other day, with parental restrictions on use reported by 62% of middle class users (74% of under 13's), but fewer than half of working class users of any age; further, middle class and younger children are also more likely to have set their profile to 'private' (i.e. accessible only to friends or family) - 61% of social network users overall have restricted access to their profile in the UK and similar figures apply in the US.²

Social networking sites, like much else on the internet, represent a moving target for researchers and policy-makers. Having recently reached the mass market, they continue to evolve as domestic broadband access increases and digital technologies of all kinds, including GPS location tracking on mobile platforms, become more available. Several previously 'closed' social networking sites now allow their users to incorporate features created by third parties and let users log into third party sites

using their profile information, potentially undermining corporate responsibility for users' privacy protection.

New opportunities for self-expression, learning, communication and networking?

Because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies [and] within the play of specific modalities of power (Hall, 1996: 4).

Identities are constituted through interaction with others. Increasingly, the sites in which young people perform and experiment with identity include the online domain. As both technology and its uses evolve, this reconfigures the possibilities for social identity construction in ways that are not yet fully understood. But what remains constant, driving online and mobile communication, is young people's strong desire to connect with peers anywhere, anytime - to stay in touch, express themselves and share experiences. Contrary to popular anxieties about isolated loners who stay at home and chat to strangers online, as distinct from the sociable kids with healthy face-to-face social lives, empirical research undermines any sharp line between online and offline, or virtual and face-to-face. Rather, youthful practices are best characterised by the flexible intermixing of multiple forms of communication, with online communication primarily used to sustain local friendships already established offline, rather than to make new contacts with distant strangers (Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, & Shklovski, 2006; Gross, 2004; Mesch & Talmud, 2007), and this applies equally to social networking (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a, b).

At the heart of the explosion in online communication is the desire to construct a valued representation of oneself which affirms and is affirmed by one's peers. Observation of teenagers' social networking practices reveals the pleasure they find creating an online 'project of the self' (Giddens, 1991). A typical teenager's MySpace profile had a big welcome in sparkly pink, with music, photos, a love tester,

guestbook and dedication pages, all customised down to the scroll bars and cursor with pink candy stripes, glitter, angels, flowers, butterflies, hearts and more. As she said, 'you can just change it all the time [and so] you can show different sides of yourself' (Danielle, 13, quoted in Livingstone, 2008a). Friends' responses are often strongly affirming, offering mutual recognition in the peer network (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006).

Teenagers have long decorated their bedroom walls with images expressive of their identity, also keeping a diary or photo album, sending notes and chatting to friends. So does online social networking make a difference? Few claim that social networking to have dramatically transformed children and young people's lives, but its specific affordances do appear to facilitate changes in the quantity and, arguably, the quality of communication: these include the ease, speed and convenience of widespread access and distribution of content, connectivity throughout a near-global network, the persistence and searchability of content over time, the facility to replicate, remix and manipulate content, and settings for managing conditions of privacy, anonymity and exchange (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ito et al., 2008).

One consequence is the wide circles of friends (or 'friends of friends') sustained by social networking teenagers: a survey of US 13-18 year olds found the average number of social networking contacts is 75 (Harris Interactive, 2006). Self-report methods may distort the picture – an analysis of contacts on a random selection of public MySpace profiles for users aged 16+ found the median number to be only 27 (Thelwall, 2008), though contacts numbering in the hundreds are commonplace (Salaway, Caruso, Nelson, & Ellison 2008), this enabling bridging social capital – the creation and maintenance of extensive social networks of weak ties (Ellison et al., 2007). A second consequence important to by teenagers is that social networking enables them to overcome the embarrassments of face-to-face communication, because they afford asynchronous, noncommittal, playful interaction in which the management of 'face' and negotiation of flirting, misinterpretation and innuendo is more controllable (Livingstone, 2008a). Third, social networking disembods communication from its traditional anchoring in the face-to-face situation of physical co-location where conventions of trust, authenticity and reciprocity are well

understood, re-embedding it in more flexible, complex and ambiguous networks in which, it seems, children share advice and support with peers (Heverly, 2008).

Possibly, those who do not engage in social networking miss out on more than just communication. The think tank, Demos, challenges the public sector to keep up with and enable 'the current generation of young people [who] will reinvent the workplace and society' (Green & Hannon, 2007: 62). Educators and advocates of new digital literacies are confident that social networking encourages the development of transferable technical and social skills of value in formal and informal learning (Crook & Harrison, 2008; Ito et al, 2008). Many public sector and non-governmental organisations, from educators to child welfare workers to activist movements hope that through social networking services they can address young people on their own terms, putting the potential of viral marketing to positive use.³ However, whether these wider benefits exist is yet to be established by empirical research.

New risks of privacy invasion, bullying and dangerous contacts?

New opportunities tend to be associated with new risks (Livingstone and Helsper, in press). The UK's Home Office (2008) identifies a series of risks to children's safety associated with social networking - bullying, harassment, exposure to harmful content, theft of personal information, sexual grooming, violent behaviour, encouragement to self-harm and racist attacks. Anxious headlines – 'Knife a Pal on Facebook' (Clench, 2008), 'Facebook spells end of lasting friendships, says expert' (Smith, 2008), 'MySpace Invaders: Evil Lurks on Teen Sites' (Webster & Edwards, 2007) - certainly overstate the problem, but there are grounds for genuine concern. Such research findings as exist link social networking with a range of content, contact and conduct risks to children and young people, including some perpetrated by children themselves.

The UK Children Go Online survey of 9-19 year olds found that, among those who used the internet at least weekly, 57% had seen online pornography, 31% had seen violent and 11% had seen racist content. Further, 31% had received sexual comments online and 28% had been sent unsolicited sexual material. A third had received

bullying comments online and 8% had gone to a meeting with someone first met online (Livingstone & Bober, 2005). Two adolescent practices are likely to exacerbate online risk – the disclosure of personal information and the experimental nature of peer communication. Yet it seems teenagers are fairly though not entirely careful when communicating online. A content analysis of a random sample of 2423 public MySpace profiles produced by under 18s found that many provided personal photos (57%), but only a few discussed alcohol consumption (18%), showed images of friends in swimsuit/underwear (16%), provided real names (9%), discussed smoking (8%), showed themselves in swimsuit/underwear (5%) or discussed marijuana use (2%) (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). A USA survey found that while boys and younger teens are more likely to post false information, older teenagers (especially girls) are more likely to reveal detailed personal information: overall, 49% included their school and 29% their email address (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). An Irish survey of 10-20 year olds found that while 49% gave out their date of birth, only 12% gave their mobile phone number and 8% their home address (Anchor, 2007). Since social networking sites are designed for teenagers to provide at least their name, birth date and photograph, such personal disclosures are unsurprising.

There is growing evidence that personal disclosure facilitates communication risks. While mild peer-to-peer problems may include teenagers teasing each other by posting ‘embarrassing’ pictures, concerns are growing about ‘cyberbullying’ (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006): a 2006 survey found that, although 69% pupils were bullied in past year, only 7% said they had received unpleasant or bullying emails/IM/text messages (Bullying UK, 2006), although another survey found 20% had been cyberbullied (NCH/Tesco, 2006). Higher levels of cyberbullying are reported in the USA: 72% of 12-17 year olds, an online survey found, had been bullied online in the previous year, and 85% had also been bullied in school. Although from a self-selected sample, these figures show how online and offline bullying are linked (Juvonen & Gross, 2008): Hinduja and Patchin (2009) found that 82% of those bullied online knew their perpetrator and 42% who reported being cyberbullied were also bullied at school.

Much research tends not to distinguish modes of communication - email, text, chatroom, instant messaging or social networking. While 33% of 10-15 year olds contacted in the USA reported being harassed online in 2007, they were more likely

to be harassed through instant messaging or chatrooms than via social networking sites (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). Ybarra et al (2007) argue that teenagers who communicate in multiple ways online are most at risk of online victimization, as are those who seek out opportunities to talk about sex with unknown people and who have unknown people in their buddy lists (see also Internet Safety Technical Task Force, 2009). Having found that lower self-esteem and well-being is more common among teenagers who particularly seek opportunities to talk to strangers online, Valkenburg and Peter (2007a) argue that chatrooms favour such interaction with strangers more than instant messaging. For social networking, a key factor might be whether a teenager's profile is set to public or private and whether he or she is careful or casual in accepting unknown contacts as friends. However, research has yet carefully to disentangle the workings of these different factors – forms of online communication, conditions of use, characteristics of the young users, and possible adverse consequences.

Policy implications: balancing opportunities and risks in social networking

Children and youth worldwide have adopted social networking sites enthusiastically, partly because of the erosion of children's freedoms in the physical world (Gill, 2008). But children's agency should not be overstated, for their practices are constrained by their degree of digital literacy (which is not as high as popularly assumed; Livingstone, 2008b), and by the technical designs of social networking sites (which impede easy management of settings and transparency regarding the commercial use of personal information). In this section, we identify pressing five issues for researchers and policy makers.

First, opportunities and risks are linked. Teenagers' experience of a range of opportunities is positively correlated with their experiences of online risk, so that the more opportunities they take up, the more risks they encounter, and the more policy attempts to limit risks the more it may also limit opportunities (Livingstone & Helsper, in press). Further, the more skilled teenagers are in their use of the internet, the more they experience both opportunities and risks (and not, as often supposed, the

more able they are to avoid risks). The interdependencies between risks and opportunities are partly due to youthful exploration and risk-taking practices – it being part of adolescence to push boundaries and seek out new, even transgressive opportunities (Hope, 2007). It is also a matter of interface design – for example, pornography and sexual advice results from the same online search while filters may block both; similarly, poorly designed privacy controls can be misunderstood by users seeking to share intimate information with friends.

Second, as communicative environments develop, so do the media or digital literacy demands on their users. As long as definitions of media literacy remain contested and schools remain reluctant to incorporate media education into teacher training and classroom curricula, children's knowledge will lag behind the industry's fast-changing practices of embedded marketing, use of personal data, user tracking and so forth, most of which is opaque to young people as they navigate the options before them. Further, limitations on and inequalities in digital literacies mean not all young people benefit from the new opportunities on offer; indeed, providing online resources may exacerbate rather than overcome inequality as opportunities are disproportionately taken up by the already-privileged (Hargittai, 2007).

Third, addressing risk cannot be left solely to parents and children, as neither fully understands how to manage this online nor has sufficient resources to do so. Noting confusion among parents, children and those working in child protection regarding the risks social networking poses to children, the UK's Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (2006) calls for 'safety by design' so as to build safety protection into the interface rather than relying on the safety awareness and digital literacy skills of children and parents. In the UK, the Byron Review (2008) led to a new UK Council for Child Internet Safety, established to provide independent and accountable oversight of commercial self-regulatory practices. At a European level, the EC Safer Internet plus programme has supported guidance for pan-European self-regulation of social networking services (EC Social Networking Task Force, 2009). One key issue is ensuring appropriate privacy protection for children,⁴ leading the European Network and Information Agency to consider a range of means to address privacy-related threats, identity issues and social risks, from awareness raising to improving transparency of data handling practices, and from authentication and consent

processes to default software setting and automated filters; Hogben, 2007; see also Kesan & Shah, 2006).

Fourth, specific attention is required for ‘at risk’ children, given growing indications that those low in self-esteem or lacking satisfying friendships or relations with parents are also those at risk through online social networking communication (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004) and, further, that those at risk may also be those who then perpetrate harm towards others. A balanced risk assessment should also note that, though dangerous, risks to children from adult sexual predators on social networking sites are very rare (Internet Safety Technical Task Force, 2009), and more common is the misuse of personal information by spammers and fraudsters (Jagatic, Johnson, Jakobsson, & Menczer, 2007) and the inadvertent release of personal information harmful to young people's reputations and employment prospects (YouGov, 2007).

Lastly, in framing policies to reduce risk, children's rights must not be forgotten. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child includes the right to freedom of assembly and expression as well as freedom from harm and privacy from the state, commerce and individuals. Since children are concerned to maintain privacy from their parents, this challenges simplistic advice that parents should ‘check up’ on their children's social networking activities, with or without their permission. The balance between opportunities and risks should, arguably, be struck differently for ‘at risk’ children, where greater monitoring or restrictions may be legitimate - moreover, for these children especially, relying on parents to undertake this role may be inappropriate.

In all, the evidence to date suggests that, for most children, social networking affords considerable benefits in terms of communication and relationships, less proven benefits as yet regarding learning and participation, and some transfer of bullying and other social risks from offline to online domains. While there is, therefore, much left to do for policy makers if children are, overall, to gain substantial benefit from social networking, there is also much left for researchers to do. In writing this article, we have struggled to find sufficient empirical research on which to ground our claims. Research must keep up to date with children and young people's social practices

online, as their enthusiasm for social networking is undeniable and their future uses of this technology may, as so often before, still surprise us.

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Endnotes

¹ These figures from Ofcom (2008) have been rebased for all UK 8-17 year olds and recalculated by age for this article.

² A Pew Internet survey of American 12-17 year olds found that two-thirds keep their profile wholly or partially private and that, of the information that is made public, much is either non-revealing or false (Lenhart & Madden, 2007).

³ Bringing together the British Youth Council, Children's Rights Alliance for England, National Children's Bureau, National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, the National Youth Agency and Save the Children England, Participation Works (<http://www.participationworks.org.uk/>) uses social networking to give children a voice; see also Digizen.org, a project 'designed to investigate how social networking services can and are being used to support personalised formal and informal learning by young people in schools and colleges' (<http://www.digizen.org/socialnetworking/>)

⁴ In one study, one in six university students expressed high concern that a stranger might know their class schedule and address but these same students had provided exactly this information on their Facebook profile, having misunderstood Facebook's privacy policy (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Tufekci, 2008). Emerging tools which enable users to broadcast their locations and activities online automatically represent a particular threat.