Teenagers and the Internet: new research on the reality of social media and youth

What do we really know about how teenagers use social media? What do they think about Facebook and

how skilled are they at using it? Researcher Ranjana Das has been talking to a selection of young people and has been coming up with some fascinating insights. Here's her report.

A couple of years ago, Polis brought together internet researchers to challenge the 'digital natives' myth (read the report here). The consensus was that, firstly, children and young people are not a monolithic group who are all rushing exuberantly into the world of new media with uniform expertise, and secondly, that their use of the media changes significantly as they grow up. In some recent research I pursued both these strands empirically and spoke to 60 children between the ages of 11 and 18, across schools in Greater London. Let's take a look at these fresh findings.

Young children (11-12 years old) seem to be in awe of an unknown somebody somewhere behind Facebook. This person is powerful, distant, unknown and, represents someone who knows everything and can use this knowledge for a range of ends.

Slightly older children (13-14 years old) also seem confident that there is someone behind it all but begin to unpack the idea that it's a 'system' rather than a person. The 'power' of this system or someone almost disappears for those approaching adulthood who make no reference to a strange and unknown singular figure behind the site – they seem aware of the commercial pressures and competition surrounding these sites.

Pre-teens place a strikingly high amount of trust in the brand – in the person behind it all, who they cannot see, but who they trust, exists. Early teens share a perception of some system behind all of this, but they can distinguish, albeit with a range of misconceptions, how and why those behind Facebook have different strategies than those behind Myspace. Older teens display the highest amount of scepticism, having located these sites as companies 'out there', trying out new things to earn money.

Early teens seem to begin to divide other users into a range of categories – people they want to get to know, people 'out there' to get into trouble, and people they would perhaps wish to 'try' out with guarded curiosity. In contrast to their pre-teen counterparts who are hesitant in the fact of knowing there are unknown others 'out there' to harm unsuspecting children, mid-teens begin to show some disdain for those who cannot guard their privacy online and let themselves fall prey to unwanted incidents, or those who are too childish for the site.

Pre-teens seem to throw up a wide range of stories collected from the media, parents and conversations around them. Most of these are stories that cause them concern, and yet propel them to try things out. Early teens tell stories around the texts which are increasingly more personal, born out of individual experience or the experiences of those they know.

Mid and older teens share some, although not many, negative stories around the text that are also less general and more personal. High in literacies, they can 'manage' the interface better and seem less perturbed.

Expertise with the interface is at its lowest with pre-teens. A high amount of conceptual knowledge prevails though. Expertise is high with early and mid-teens and is used to explore a range of options (groups, games, quizzes, working out new things). Older teens show high expertise with online interfaces and interestingly a narrower range of paths through which they use these technical skills.

These kids came from a range of backgrounds – inner city state schools, private academically selective schools, media speciality schools and an even more diverse range of homes. The findings clearly show difference and diversity in these 'digital natives' and their use of social network sites.

This article by Ranjana Das

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