

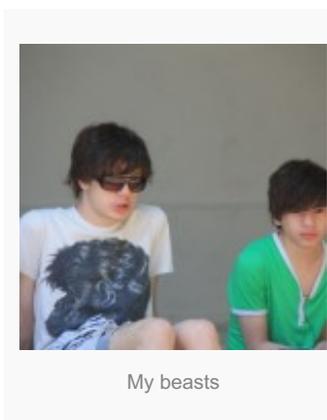
Teenagers: the most dangerous beast in the media ecology

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/07/13/teenagers-the-most-dangerous-beast-in-the-media-ecology/

2009-7-13

A teenage intern at Morgan Stanley has set the new [media world alight](#) by suggesting that his coevals don't consume Twitter. For traditional media folk this is a welcome sign that not every social networking gizmo is taken up with alacrity by what are often described as digital natives.

But as [Suw Charman-Anderson](#) has written, the picture is more complicated than that. I think it is even more complicated than Suw says! Here goes.



Teenagers are the most dangerous beasts in our fragile digital ecology. We will all depend upon them in the future, so we need to know what the little buggers are thinking and where they are headed. If you can tell me what a 14 year-old will be consuming in four years – or even two years time – then you are not only wise, you will be very, very wealthy.

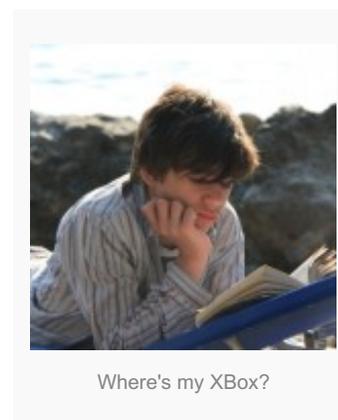
The excellent paper written by the Morgan Stanley intern, [Matthew Robson](#), is very well put together and full of accurately observed anecdotes and analysis, albeit from a highly selective sample. [Suw Charman-Anderson](#) rightly suggests that it is not scientific but when we are seeking to understand behaviour we sometimes have to be less academic. Here's a flavour of what it says about newspapers:

"No teenager that I know of regularly reads a newspaper, as most do not have the time and cannot be bothered to read pages and pages of text while they could watch the news summarised on the internet or on TV."

I know at least two teenagers who regularly read the Guardian and NME, but putting that aside, this is hardly earth-shattering. Teenagers have never read newspapers. It is something you do when you get political/a job.

Matthew Robson is much more interesting and made most waves, though, with his views on new media and, specifically, Twitter. He describes the youth consumer behaviour very neatly:

"...teenagers do not use twitter. Most have signed up to the service, but then just leave it as they realise that they are not going to update it (mostly because texting twitter uses up credit, and they would rather text friends with that credit). In addition, they realise that no one is viewing their profile, so their 'tweets' are pointless."



Again, well done to Robson for outlining in a very credible way why a certain platform would not appeal to teenagers. But, of course, Twitter works differently for different people. You may not believe this, but I don't even follow Stephen Fry...and I doubt he follows me. But we both get a lot out of it. Other people may not.

Now here's the complicated bit. It seems that it is impossible to generalise about teenagers. Like the rest of the population they act according to class, education, region, race, gender and a host of other factors.



Turning to Old Media?

Robson is basing his analysis on his mates. If you read the [comments on the Guardian account of the story](#), you will see a whole range of different descriptions of what teenagers do and don't do.

The 'digital native' idea is a bit of myth. As Matthew Robson describes, most teenagers use a variety of digital devices, but when you talk to people who work with teenagers they describe a much more complex picture of what they actually do.

The same teenagers who have literacy problems have media literacy problems. Many of the teenagers apparently comfortable with new media are in fact only using a very limited range of applications and in a very limited way.

Other [researchers](#) indicate that teenagers are getting just as frustrated as the rest of us with the complexity and cost of many online and mobile applications.

Which is why more research is needed. Perhaps the best thing that could come out of Matthew Robson's pithy note could be that people like Morgan Stanley commission some serious and longitudinal research – ideally involving teenagers as researchers as well as subjects.

A number of my [colleagues](#) have done brilliant work on young people and the Internet, indeed, Polis has a [Research Fellow](#) working on precisely this area. Stand by for some serious analysis in the autumn!

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