**Teenagers and social networking – it might actually be good for them**

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Is too much online socialising among teenagers really creating a generation who can't relate face to face? Not according to the evidence, says Clive Thompson

I ask a teenage girl, how often do you text? "250 times a day, or something," she tells me. Shocking! The digital lives of teenagers have become the target of weekly attacks. In a recent essay for the Guardian, the novelist Jonathan Franzen bemoaned online socialising, arguing that it was creating *a uniquely shallow and trivial culture*, making kids unable to socialise face to face. Then the American comedian Louis CK proclaimed on TV that he wouldn't give his daughters cellphones for fear they wouldn't *develop empathy*.

There's also the scientist and writer Susan Greenfield's famously apocalyptic warnings: "We could be raising a hedonistic generation who live only in the thrill of the computer-generated moment and are in distinct danger of detaching themselves from what the rest of us would consider the real world."

As a parent of two boys at primary school, I'm not immune to worry about these issues. And you don't need to be a parent to fret about the effect of all this technology on young people. Newspapers are constantly filled with frightening accounts of pornography addiction and aggression supposedly caused by violent videogames – particularly now, as Grand Theft Auto V hits the shelves. But even when these titillating accounts touch on real concerns, they do not really reflect the great mass of everyday teenage social behaviour: the online chat, the texting, the surfing, and the emergence of a new *teenage sphere that is conducted digitally*.

That trend is real. Is it, as Franzen and the others fear, turning kids into emoticon-addled zombies, unable to connect, unable to think, form a coherent thought or even make eye contact? Could this be true?

I don't think so. Let's go back to that girl who texts 250 times a day. The truth is, she was an extreme case I cherry-picked to startle you – because when I interviewed her, she was in a group of friends with a much wider range of experiences. Two others said they text only 10 times a day. One was a Facebook refusenik ("I'm all Instagram, pictures of what I'm doing in the city, with my friends. We're visual people"). A few were devotees of Snapchat, the app that lets you send a picture or text that, like a cold-war communiqué, is destroyed after one viewing. One had a phone filled with charmingly goofy emoticons, another disapproved: "I'm a skilled writer," she told me. "People sometimes misunderstand tone, so you have to be precise." As it turns out, the diversity of use in this group of friends is confirmed by research. Fewer than 20% of kids send more than 200 texts a day; 31% send barely 20 or fewer.

*New technologies always provoke generational panic*, which usually has more to do with adult fears than with the lives of teenagers. In the 1930s, parents fretted that radio was gaining "an invincible hold of their children". In the 80s, the great danger was the Sony Walkman – producing the teenager who "throbs with orgasmic rhythms", as philosopher Allan Bloom claimed. When you look at today's digital activity, the facts are much more positive than you might expect.

Indeed, social scientists who study young people have found that their digital use can be inventive and even beneficial. This is true not just in terms of their social lives, but their education too. So if you use a ton of social media, do you become unable, or unwilling, to engage in face-to-face contact? The evidence suggests not. Research by Amanda Lenhart of the Pew Research Centre, a US think-tank, found that the most avid texters are also the kids most likely to spend time with friends in person. One form of socialising doesn't replace the other. It augments it.

"Kids still spend time face to face," Lenhart says. Indeed, as they get older and are given more freedom, they often ease up on social networking. Early on, the web is their "third space", but by the late teens, it's replaced in reaction to greater autonomy.

They have to be on Facebook, to know what's going on among friends and family, but they are ambivalent about it, says Rebecca Eynon, a research fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, who has interviewed about 200 British teenagers over three years. As they *gain experience with living online*, they begin to adjust their behaviour, wrestling with new communication skills, as they do in the real world.

Parents are wrong to worry that *kids don't care about privacy*. In fact, they spend hours tweaking Facebook settings or using quick-delete sharing tools, such as Snapchat, to minimize their traces. Or they post a photograph on Instagram, have a pleasant conversation with friends and then delete it so that no traces remain.

But surely all *this short-form writing is eroding literacy*? Certainly, teachers worry. Pew Centre surveys have found that teachers say that kids use overly casual language and text speak in writing, and don't have as much patience for long, immersive reading and complex arguments. Yet studies of first-year college papers suggest these anxieties may be partly based on misguided nostalgia. When Stanford University scholar Andrea Lunsford gathered data on the rates of errors in "freshman composition" papers going back to 1917, she found that they were virtually identical to today.

But even as error rates stayed stable, student essays have blossomed in size and complexity. They are now six times longer and, unlike older "what I did this summer" essays, they offer arguments buttressed by evidence. Why? Computers have vastly increased the ability of students to gather information, sample different points of view and write more fluidly.

When the linguist Naomi Baron studied students' instant messaging even there she found surprisingly rare usage of short forms such as "u" for "you", and as students got older, they began to write in more grammatical sentences. That is because it confers status: they want to seem more adult, and they know how adults are expected to write. "If you want to look serious," as the teenage Sydney told me, "you don't use 'u'." Clearly, teaching teens formal writing is still crucial, but texting probably isn't destroying their ability to learn it.

It is probably true that fewer kids are *heavy readers* compared with two generations ago, when cheap paperbacks spiked rates of reading. But even back then, as the literacy expert Wendy Griswold says, a minority of people – perhaps 20% – were lifelong heavy readers, and it was cable TV, not the internet, that struck a blow at that culture in the 80s. Griswold still finds that 15% or more of kids are deeply bookish. "The ambitious kids. I see no reason that says that it's going to change."

In fact, *the online world offers kids remarkable opportunities to become literate* and creative because young people can now publish ideas not just to their friends, but to the world. And it turns out that when they write for strangers, their sense of "authentic audience" makes them work harder, push themselves further, and create powerful new communicative forms.

Consider Sam McPherson. At 13, he became obsessed with the television show Lost and began to contribute to a fan-run wiki. "I jumped in and just started editing," Sam says. He developed skills in cooperating with far-flung strangers.

This type of interaction online with strangers can make kids more community-minded. Joseph Kahne, a professor of education at Mills College in California, studied 400 teenagers over three years. Kahne found that *teens who participated in fan or hobby sites were more likely than other kids to do real-world volunteering*. Interestingly, this wasn't true of being on Facebook.

Indeed, you could argue that parents should encourage their kids to spend less time on Facebook and more on *sites devoted to their obsessions*. Take Tavi Gevinson, a 17-year-old student who founded and edits Rookie, a site that features articles by and for young women. She says online socialising is "the *opposite of isolation – it's all about connection*. I've made some of my closest friends online, through blogging communities."

Distraction is, of course, a serious issue. When kids flip from chat to music to homework, they are indeed likely to have trouble doing each task well. And studies show that pupils don't check the veracity of information online – "smart searching" is a skill schools need to teach urgently. It's also true that too much social networking and game playing can cut into schoolwork and sleep. This is precisely why parents still need *to set firm boundaries around* it, as with any other distraction.

But many teenagers recognize this. "Maybe it's a natural part of maturing," one girl says about her reduced use of social networking. "I try not to check Facebook until I've done my homework."

"You do not," laughs her friend. "I've seen you!"

"Well, it's discipline! I'm trying!"

So what's the best way to cope? The same boring old advice that applies to everything in parenting. "Moderation". It's key to model good behavior. *Parents who stare non-stop at their phones and don't read books are likely to breed kids who will do the same*. As ever, we ought to scrutinize our own behavior.

Questions:

1. Does online socializing really create a uniquely shallow and trivial culture?

2. What is empathy?

3. What do you think of the so called ‘hedonistic generation’?

4. Does online socializing turn kids into emoticon-addled zombies, unable to think, form a coherent thought or even make eye contact?

5. Do you agree that texting 250 times a day is too much? How many times a day do you text?

6. Comment on the word *refusenik*.

7. What people are called ‘visual people’? Are you the one?

8. What is Snapchat? Do you make use of it?

9. What emoticons do you find goofy? Can you give examples?

10.Do you agree that new technologies always provoke generational panic?

11. Can you give evidence that digital activities that initially fretted people proved positive in the long run?

12. Can one form of socializing replace the other?

13. Can you agree that kids don't care about privacy during online socializing?

14. Do you do anything special to minimize your traces on the Internet?

15. Give your arguments that how to behave online is a new social skill? What is main idea?

16. Is short-form writing, used by teenagers, eroding literacy?

17. What can be given counter-evidence to this?

18. In what way would you suggest transforming classrooms taking into consideration positive aspects of online socializing?

19. What boundaries would you set around your child to protect him from Internet abuse?

Writing + Speaking: choose one of the following

\* **The online world offers kids remarkable opportunities to become literate.**

\* **Texting full of abbreviations undermines teenagers’ writing** **culture**.

\* **Few kids are heavy readers now, and it is bad**.

\* **Teens who participate in fan or hobby sites are more likely than other kids to do real-world volunteering**.

\* **Parents should encourage their kids to spend more time on sites devoted to their hobbies**.

\* **Online socializing is not isolation – it's all about connection**.

\* **Parents who stare non-stop at their phones are likely to breed kids who will do the same.**