

The way early adolescents are communicating emotionally using social networking sites

Teenagers' use of social networking sites (sns's)¹ can prompt fear and concern (see fig1). But could it be argued that there is a good side to sns's, and could there be any benefit for early adolescents from their apparent obsessive use of Bebo, MySpace and MSN? My ethnographic study, carried out over the last three years for my PhD research, has shown that whilst there may be a 'dark side' of the internet most early adolescents are using sns's to do what they have always done: have fun, play with their identity, and turn to their peers for comfort and support.

I first became aware of the extent to which some early adolescents are using sns's when I was counselling 12-14 year olds in the East End of London. Many of these lively and talented young people lived with difficult family circumstances; sometimes they were the main carer, not many lived with their fathers, frequently parents had problems with drugs or alcohol. There were few boundaries in their lives, they identified themselves by their 'tag' and their post code, and knife crime was a presence in their community. Often school was the most secure place they knew, but they rebelled and fought its rules and regulations. What was noticeable about these children though was that they were increasingly communicating with each other using MSN, and often this communication would continue into the early hours of the morning, making them tired and lethargic at school. But I became aware that this communication was reassuring to them; it was a way of working out some of the issues that had occurred in their day, and could be a means of 'shutting out' what was happening at home. I was interested to find out more about how children's internal worlds are played out on the internet and my research followed the friendship networks of 20 early adolescents aged 10 – 14, living in the south-east of England. I was fortunate in my research journey to have had the supervision and support of Colleen McLaughlin, an acknowledged expert in child psychosocial development, and head of counselling at the Faculty of Education, Cambridge.

How are early adolescents using social networking sites?

While some excellent research has been published recently about children and young people's use of digital technology (Byron, 2008; Ito et al., 2008; Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Ofcom, 2008) (see fig 2), little research has been done on the way in which *early adolescents* are using digital media, or about how they communicate *emotionally* using this technology.

Early adolescence is an important and significant time, one of transition cognitively, socially and physically; a key task is to explore identity, and this is often done through the friendships that are made. It is a time when children's horizons grow considerably and friends become more important (Dunn, 2004; Erikson, 1968; Hartup, 2000). Digital media can be a source of power as well as information (see fig 3). With

¹ I use the term 'sns's' here to describe websites such as Bebo or Facebook, as well as instant messaging e.g. MSN, and chat rooms such as those on game site Runescape.

growing autonomy, early adolescents can exert agency by playing with their identity online; in my research children admit to lying about their age, partly because to join a sns they have to be 13, although many believe they have to be 16. In their view it can be fun and entertaining to experiment with being older, even though this may sometimes be risky or even dangerous; they believe they are in control:

..erm, well I have (exaggerated) once or twice .. I have said stuff like ‘oh I am a model’ to get some guy ask for my msn and say like ‘oh will you go on cam’ and stuff like that so I just delete them on the site I’m using. (Rosie aged 12).

This sounds alarming, but Rosie was a popular girl and, slightly overweight, enjoyed the notion that she could be older, and ‘be a model’. Rosie was one of the most knowledgeable in the group about online security and safety, and was clear about the risks she was taking, but felt safe in the knowledge that she could not be identified and could merely delete the ‘guy’ when she wished. Most importantly she did not do this in isolation, but kept her friends fully informed.

The Importance of Friendship

Friendship is immensely important to early adolescents, and can be a source of comfort and reassurance. Studies on resilience have shown that adolescents who have a strong peer support system are likely to cope better with difficult family circumstances such as parents with substance abuse or divorce and separation (Dunn, 2004; Gore & Eckenrode, 1996). Children on the Internet frequently sign off their posts with ‘BFFE’, and it does seem that in the digital age children really can ‘Be Friends Forever’ with children’s notion of ‘friendship’ changing radically compared to pre-digital days. Emotional support is given to friends through periods of change: change of school, change of relationships, change of home. They are able to keep in contact with friends who have moved away, and friendships are supported online even though face to face communication is not possible.

Molly for instance was worried about moving to her new secondary school where she did not know anyone, but she had been to a summer camp at the end of Year 6 where she made some ‘best friends’ with whom she was able to share her concerns. Although they lived several hundred miles away, she explained she was able to maintain regular contact with them:

I went to (summer camp) and met some friends there, and we were there for a week, and I can call some of them my best friends because they’re really, really nice and I still talk to some of them on MSN and Facebook, and I only knew them for a week... in such a short period of time you can become so close to people and I even cried when we had to go back. (Molly, 12)

Robbie and Will, aged 13, missed their friend Paul who had moved to Portugal, and they knew he was lonely. But they were maintaining regular contact with Paul through playing on the online games site Runescape, chatting to him through the private chat facility. Although the boys were not addressing Paul’s loneliness directly, the fact that they could play online, and give each other an update of what was happening in their lives, was immensely supportive. Sometimes such support is given

through deliberate displacement such as apparently banal conversations and banter, the posting of photographs to illustrate ‘what’s up’, or the playing of online games; at other times I observed children give direct advice, or use ‘emoticons’ and ‘pokes’² to express concern, and just to remind their friends that they are there for them.

I don’t know what I would do without MSN, it’s quite supportive ... like when my uncle was dying, my friends kept sending me little messages.

Lilly aged 14

The Dark Side

There is of course a dark side of the internet, and there has been concern expressed about ‘cyberbullying’, and children being vulnerable to predators. However I believe that it is the same children who are vulnerable in the offline world, perhaps those with insecure attachments or low self-esteem and with few friends, that are most likely to come to harm. Most early adolescents in my research are aware of the dangers, know to set their privacy settings, never accept ‘friends’ they do not know, and understand that any hint of cyberbullying should be discussed and reported.

What is perhaps of more concern, as Tania Byron pointed out in her report last year, is parents’ lack of knowledge of the Internet (Byron, 2008). In my research thirteen year old Patrick’s mother was anxious, and refused to let him use Facebook or MSN for fear of online predators, but he was regularly online using the open chat facility on World of Warcraft, and on his XBOX LIVE; she did not realise that he was communicating with complete strangers. It is important that adults do understand in detail how to protect children online because often communication is carried out away from adult viewing³. Children at this age are especially likely to share intimate thoughts and feelings (Berndt, 1981; Douvan & Adelson, 1966), therefore privacy is important, and many children in the research expressed a preference for using a laptop rather than the family computer because, as 11 year old Jessica put it: ‘it’s private and mum and dad can’t watch what I do’.

Allowing agency, risk taking and autonomy

Having begun my research with concern about early adolescents’ apparent ‘addictive’ use of sns’s, I believe that they appear to be gaining from their interactions online. Emotional support is received and given at important transitional stages such as change of school, change of family circumstances, change of home. The internet is a source of knowledge for young people; they can find out about their world from the relative safety of their home. Early adolescents can be creative and assert personal agency through sns’s; it is their pictures, their life stories, their gossip that is posted on their sites. It allows an expression of freedom – perhaps unavailable to early adolescents before, and it can be a secret adult-free world. They can make choices – who they accept and who they decline – they are in control. And they can successfully carry out the most important tasks of early adolescence – the exploration of identity and the fostering of friendship.

² An ‘emoticon’ is a symbol that depicts an emotion e.g. a smiley face, and ‘poke’ is a visual ‘nudge’ on Facebook intended to attract the attention of a particular ‘friend’. Children in the research (boys and girls) were observed receiving and sending these quite regularly especially ‘hugs’ and ‘kisses’.

³ For information and toolkit on how to protect young people online see <http://www.nspcc.org.uk>

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Fig 1



Fig 2

The graphic is titled "2008". It contains a news snippet from the Telegraph.co.uk dated September 23, 2008, about the government spending £300m on internet access for children. To the right, a blue box states "74% of children 9 – 19 have access to the internet at home" based on the LSE: UK Children Go Online 2007 survey. Below this, a black box lists internet access rates by region: ABC1 at 86% and C2DE at 63%, citing Ofcom, 2008. At the bottom, a quote from Jim Knight, Schools Minister, states: "Home access to ICT has educational, economic and social benefits. In fact it is now clear that pupils without internet access are at a disadvantage to their peers. Home access is increasingly becoming an essential part of a good education and having a computer with internet access should be seen as equally essential as having a school bag, a uniform or a pen and paper."

Fig 3

The image is a collage of news snippets and a Twitter screenshot. On the left, a snippet titled "Pope launches YouTube channel" is shown. In the center, a snippet titled "How the internet helped propel Barack Obama to the White House" is displayed, with a sub-headline "Barack Obama's mastery of the internet key to his election victory" and a byline "By Gordon Rayner, Chief Reporter". To the right, a snippet titled "New York plane crash: Twitter breaks the news, again" is shown, with a sub-headline "Twitter has once again led the media and the blogosphere in breaking news." Below this is a screenshot of a Twitter post from "twitpic" with the text "New York plane crash on plane: 'You pulled it off!'". The tweet includes a photo of the crash site and a link to a news article.