

# Youthful practices on social networking sites: Balancing questions of design and literacy

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# The rise of social networking

- Internet use a daily activity for teens - increasing hours, in more kids' bedrooms, for ever younger kids
- MySpace 5.2 million UK users, Bebo 2.7 million - MySpace now more viewed than Google
- 49% of UK 8-17 year olds have a profile (Ofcom, 2007)
- Among USA 13-18 yrs, average # social networking 'friends' = 75; IM buddies = 52; mobile contacts = 38
- Europe: 32% online 16-24 yr olds use SNS at least monthly (2007)
- Pew/Internet 2007: 55% online teens have SNS profile, to stay in touch with people (91%) and make new friends (49%)

MySpace is about me, me, me, and look at me and look at me.

Generation shock finds liberty online: the children of the internet age are ready to bare their bodies and souls in a way their parents never could.

Kids today. They have no sense of shame. They have no sense of privacy.

# And thus the rise of policy interest

Partly a matter of leisure – educators, civic bodies, etc encourage SNS

Also a matter of concern – and regulation

*EC Safer Internet plus: public consultation on social networking (2008)*

- Main risks – bullying, invasion of privacy; grooming also a concern
- Protection of minors vital but must respect children's privacy
- Self-regulation should meet public expectations, protect minors, ensure compliance is monitored plus minimum legal protection
- Education and awareness raising is crucial – by industry and governments

*Home Office Task Force on Child Protection on the Internet: Good practice guidance for providers and users (2008) – and now UKCCIS (post Byron)*

- Clear, accessible, responsive, 'just in time' safety info for all platforms
- Complaint handling, editorial responsibility, use of personal information, default setting to 'private' for under 18s

# Technological and social change

Two converging historical trends over past decades:

- **Changing media technologies – from mass communication to interactive communication, from broadcasting to peer networking, the producer-consumer, with new hybrid forms and genres, emerging literacies and competencies**

... but also, fundamentally:

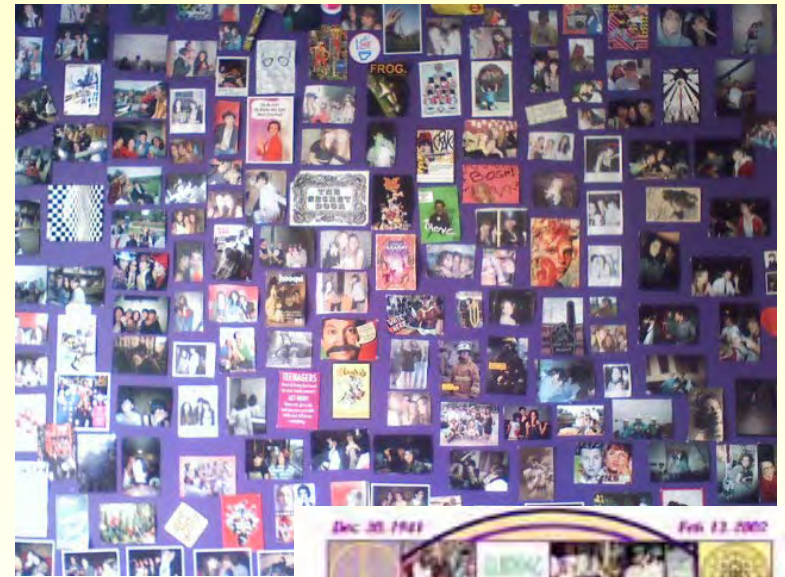
- **Changing childhood – individualisation, democratisation of the family, decline of traditional authority, extended youth, changed parent/child tensions and possibilities, transformation of intimacy, reflexive project (or biography) of the self**

mediation refers to the communication through one or more media through which the message and the relation between sender and receiver are influenced by the affordances and constraints of the specific media and genres involved (Hjarvard, 2006)

'Self-actualisation is understood in terms of a balance between opportunity and risk' (Giddens, 1991)

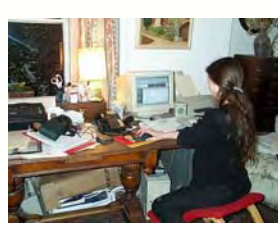
# Identity work among teenagers

- Self-attention 'raises the question ...of a successful life as an everyday expectation'
- Stylisation, in which 'objects, situations and actions are placed into a coherent sign arrangement and "presented"'
- Reflexivity or 'life styles ... turned inwards', an everyday semantic of self-observation and self-assessment' (Ziehe)

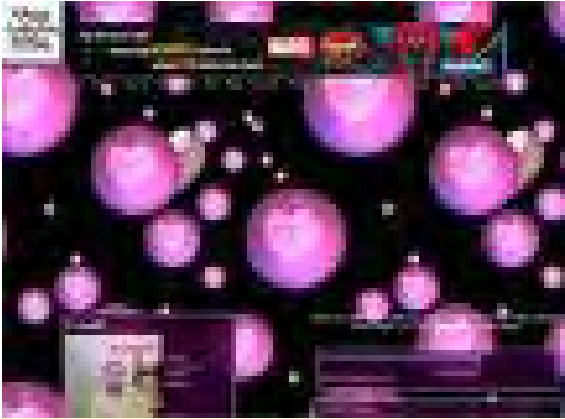


# Qualitative interview/observations, diverse experiences . . .

School Year	Gender	
	Girls	Boys
Year 9	Danielle, 13, C1, Piczo Nicki, 14, AB, MySpace Daphne, 14, C2, MySpace, Bebo, ex-Piczo Jenny, 14, DE, MySpace, Bebo Elena, 14, DE, MySpace, Facebook, Bebo	Paul, 13, C2, Bebo, ex-MySpace Joshua, 14, AB, Facebook Billy, 14, C2, MySpace
Year 10	Ellie, 15, AB, Facebook, ex-MySpace	Ryan, 15, C1, Bebo, MySpace, ex-Piczo
Year 11	Nina, 15, C1, Facebook, ex-MySpace Sophie, 16, C2, MySpace	Leo, 16, AB, MySpace Danny, 16, C1, MySpace, Facebook Simon, 16, DE, MySpace Jason, 16, DE, MySpace



# Identity as display: Elena, 14



‘Layouts really show like who you are. So look at the rainbow in that. I think that would make you sound very like bubbly... I like to have different ones... it’s different likes, different fashion, different feelings on that day.’

‘It’s nice like if you’ve got a nice picture of you and people are, oh, you look nice. It’s like quite nice, I think when people say you’re pretty’... I like it when they comment me because like it shows that they care.’



# Identity as connection: Ellie and Nina, 15

'The reason they [younger teens] like MySpace seems to be because you can decorate your page with flowers and hearts and have glitter on it, whereas on this [Facebook] it's sort of a white background with not so much, it's just a photo and a name, which is pretty much the same for everyone...This isn't to show off about my personality...It's more just like talking to three friends, and seeing as my friends know me, there's no really need for me to advertise my personality...On MySpace, everyone's got these things like, I love this, I hate this, and trying to show off who they are and I just don't think that's necessary if these actually are your friends.'

'With profiles, everything was all about having coloured backgrounds ... Whereas I just suppose like Facebook I prefer to have like older people and it was more sophisticated, can I use that word? ... I found when I was 14, I always wanted to be like someone that was older than me... When I first got MySpace, I thought it was a really cool thing because all older people had it, and they were all having their templates and things like that... But I'm sort of past that stage now, and I'm more into the plain things'.

# Affording privacy and intimacy

- Ellie: ‘I don’t have any too personal things on it, like, I’m very happy to say I’m Jewish or [have] conservative political views and I’m happy to say my birthday or I’m from London. There’s nothing too detailed that will give anyone too big a picture of me.’
- Nina – ‘well, I have my best friends, and then I have friends that I’m good friends with, and then I have friends that I see every so often, and they’re normally out of school friends... And then I have just people that I don’t really talk to, but I know who they are, and maybe it’s hi and bye in the corridor at school sort of friends’.
- Jason – ‘you don’t mind [other] people reading it, but it’s your parents, you don’t really want your parents seeing it, because I don’t really like my parents sort of looking through my room and stuff, because that’s like my private space’.

# Balancing opportunities + risks

**Evidence of risk? NB difficult issues of definitions, measurement, proportionality**

- **Online Victimization of Youth Study (2006, N=1500 10-17 year olds)**  
Since 2000, increased exposure to sexual material (34% vs 25%) and online harassment (9% vs 6%), less unwanted sexual solicitations (13% vs 19%); 4% asked for sexually explicit photos of themselves; those who were distressed increased (9% vs 6%); unwanted solicitations increasingly from acquaintances not strangers
- **CEOP (2006, discussions among 10-16 yrs, UK)**  
Social networking experiences include verbal abuse, unwanted sexual advances, problematic info, impersonation of identity; teens unclear about security of info they post, feeling pressurised into uploading info; parents ignorant of children's activities
- **Remco Pijpers Foundation (2006, N=10,900 teens<18 yrs, Holland)**  
30-40% has social networking profile; 82% boys/ 73% girls flirted online in past 6 months; 1 in 4 boys/ 1 in 5 girls had cybersexual experiences; 72% boys/ 83% girls received sexual questions; 40% boys/ 57% girls asked to undress on webcam(1:3 boys/ 1:10 girls did); 47% girls received unwanted request for sexual act on webcam (2% did); 62% girls/ 13% boys dislike receiving sexual questions online; 35% girls/ 12% boys claim a negative experience; 9% girls/ 3% boys posted sexual photos and regretted it; most aware of 'paedophiles' but unclear about boundaries among teens

# Managing privacy settings

- **Leo wants his profile public to advertise his band, yet still says uncertainly, 'I might have ticked the box, but I'm not 100% sure if I did'.**
- **Ellie signed up for the London network instead of that for her school when she first joined Facebook and now can't change this - 'I probably can, but I'm not quite, I'm not so great that, I haven't learned all the tricks to it yet'.**
- **Nina complains about Facebook that 'they should do something about making it more like private, because you can't really set your profile to private' .**

# Conclusions

- **Social networking continues a long tradition of public display of, and experimentation with, the self**
- **The psychology of identity development suggests a transition from identity as display ('the node) to identity as connection ('links')**
- **The social character of the peer group shapes how teenagers represent themselves and manage their social relations online (norms, gurus, multiple selves)**
- **Yet teens are constrained by the sites' affordances – e.g. subtle gradations in friendship are poorly reflected in the binary public/private**
- **Their internet literacy is impeded by poor site design (e.g. privacy controls)**
- **Often teens limit their online social networking, turning to other forms of communication for privacy and intimacy**
- **Yet most disclose personal information online and some run greater risks**
- **Policy responses: how to define and balance literacy, design and self-regulation?**