

Social Media and Youth

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When examining young people's experience of social media, it is useful to extend the notion of social media to appreciate not only the antecedents of some current youth online practices, but also the development of research concepts and frameworks related to this topic. For many researchers and media commentators the term social media refers principally, and narrowly, to the more communication and interaction oriented parts of the internet, including blogs, social networking sites such as Facebook, and microblogging sites such as Twitter, as well as to diverse platforms for sharing audiovisual material (e.g., YouTube, Flickr). The words "social media" first started to be used in 2005 and reflected an interest in the growth of relatively more recent interrelational parts of the internet, sometimes called Web 2.0 (Ito et al., 2010).

Yet prior to these more recent applications, social and communicative elements of the internet predating Web 2.0 had been used by youth – for example, instant messaging (IM), email, and chat rooms. In addition, youth had developed the forerunners of some current social and communicative practices via other, older media, including texting, as well as the more general uses of mobile phones. Given the emphasis in current social media discussions on the creation and sharing of content, it is worth noting that before Web 2.0, mobile phones were being used by young people to exchange audiovisual content (e.g., with Bluetooth) as well as to take and post pictures online. Young people learned about creatively fashioning and sharing textual messages – as well as the symbolic meanings of those messages – through their use of texting and IM.

Many of the research issues, concepts, and frameworks (such as understanding the place of information and communications technologies

[ICTs] within wider parent–child relations) that we now associate with the social media websites noted above were discussed initially in relation to these older social media precursors. Exploring a variety of historical antecedents also has the effect of underlining the fact that social media are not such a new development and are not even such a radical break with Web 1.0, for example. This entry will proceed with the broader understanding of the term social media, encompassing all of the above.

In examining social media and youth, it is also important to distinguish what is meant by youth. This term can cover different ages in different countries; in some societies youth extends into the late twenties, whereas in others such an age would be considered young adulthood. Meanwhile, the legal definitions of adulthood, the age at which young people are legally allowed to do different things (e.g., have sex, drive, buy alcohol), vary culturally. But the choice of words is an issue not just because of definitions and cut-off points, but also because of their connotations. Not only do writings about youth and "young people," or teenagers, refer to older children, but, arguably, they often take a perspective stressing how their social world and practices are closer to, and moving toward, adulthood. To refer to some of those same people as (still) "children" can sometimes stress the link to the world of young children, as well as their vulnerabilities, dependencies, and need for adult guidance.

The new sociology of childhood understands childhood and youth as social constructions that vary culturally and can change over time (James & Prout, 1997). In practice, only a relatively few internet and mobile phone studies have focused on young children, and most of the discourse about young people and social media websites has been about their use by older children, normally in their teens. This entry will refer to youth or young people, and will cover research whose object of study is youth, teenagers, adolescents, and (older) children. The word "children" is used here to denote the children of particular parents – that is, a family relationship.

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Youth and Mobile Phones

This section examines research on young people's use of mobile phones, including the origins both of young people's social practices and of relevant research frameworks and concepts. The earliest research on youth and mobile phones was conducted around 2000, with studies of youth and texting appearing by 2001, reflecting the relatively early adoption of mobile phones by youth in some countries during the late 1990s. Much of the early mobile phone research, including research on youth, took place in Europe and later in Asia, in large part because of the earlier developments of the mobile phone market in those regions compared with North America, where studies of youth and cellphones appear from about 2005. Some of these early studies of youth and mobile phones took place in Finland and Norway, where penetration rates were generally higher, and also in the United Kingdom, Japan, and, later, Italy. Japanese studies of youth and mobile phones (*ketiai* in Japanese) emerged out of studies of paging technology in the late 1990s, first appearing in an English volume in 2005 (Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005).

One early and ongoing focus of studies was on how the mobile phone fitted into relations between young people and their parents. Given that parents often provided their children with mobile phones and subsequently financed much of their use, one question concerned parents' motivations for doing so. In the European research, the motivation seemed to have been chiefly to monitor where their children were, hence the use of the early "umbilical cord" metaphor. Yet, just as some parents later checked their children's social media websites to find out what they were doing, that surveillance was always regarded as problematic. Research had already established that, at times, youth wanted some privacy from their parents. Those studies also identified some resistance, especially among older children, to total monitoring, noting young people's "parent management strategies" (such as saying the battery had run out or they could not find the signal). The equivalent strategies were later to be found in some of the research on youth use of social media websites. The mobile phone provided a personalized and portable means of communication, with researchers such

as Ling (2004) noting how young people could manage their social life away from the potential parental monitoring associated with using the fixed, shared telephone in the home. The same could be said of smartphones, although there has been less research on this.

Many mobile phone studies contextualized such efforts at control and resistance within broader parent-child power relations, as exemplified in the rules parents tried to impose on their children's mobile phone usage. Others stressed actual conflict less, referring more to managed autonomy as parents supported their children's increasing independence. While some research identified conflicts over the cost of children's mobile phone use (arguments that had previously existed about the costs of fixed line use), other studies noted how encouraging children to pay some of these costs was a new form of training to help them manage their financial independence. Allowing their children to have a phone was at one time itself identified as a rite of passage - leading in one Norwegian study to parents reflecting on the "right" age for a child to have a phone, as younger and younger children acquired them (Ling & Helmersen, 2000). Equivalent discussions later appeared in relation to young people's access to smartphones.

Certain writings about parents managing their children's mobile phone use also framed these practices within general changes in family life itself, including changes in the social construction of childhood. Broadly using Giddens's (1991) notion of the detraditionalization of institutions such as the family, various writers had discussed the increasing elements of democracy in many families with (especially older) children being allowed to express their views and negotiate with parents. The general point, also relevant for the narrower understanding of social media, is that not only are new technologies, facilities, and applications constantly being developed, but this is occurring when family relationships may themselves be changing.

The other major focus of research was on how mobile phones fitted into and changed interactions between peers. This included observations about the fashionable or symbolic dimension of this technology and how the choice of brand was a part of young people's presentation of self. Japanese studies noted how youth in Japan took

this a stage further by customizing mobile phones through accessories and ring tones. Another example of symbolic meaning was how, at one time, the number of entries in the phone's address book and the number of calls and texts received were used as indicators of popularity among peers. The later internet version of this occurred when the number of "buddies" on IM and the number of "friends" on social networking site profiles, including visits to those profiles and "likes" expressed by others, were all taken to indicate popularity.

As regards communications, texting received a substantial amount of research attention, especially since youth – or rather a specific cohort of youth in the late 1990s – were seen as pioneering the practice. There was early work on the development of texting etiquette, how young people shared texts (allowing others to look at them) and how they could experiment with the affordances of this application – the lack of nonverbal clues and its asynchronous nature – especially in sensitive communications such as dating. Given that the content of many texts was often not substantial in terms of the information conveyed, attention also turned to the nature of certain communications as gifts, implying reciprocity, where the symbolic nature of the gesture of sending a text was important for maintaining peer relationships. Sometimes this was referred to as "lightweight" contact (Ito, 2005). Again, these characterizations were later applied to some of young people's communications via internet based social media. More specifically, there was also some research on youth and social capital. This focused on whether the use of mobile phones to stay in nearly perpetual contact with closer networks of friends led to the formation of cliques (Ling, 2004) – that is, it strengthened bonding capital at the potential expense of bridging capital.

Although most research on young people's use of mobile phones dealt with their relations with parents and peers, there were other strands, such as studies drawing attention to the social constraints on young people's use of mobiles. For instance, one study noted wider social discourses about the growing unruliness of youth in Japan and how calling in certain public spaces, such as transport, was prohibited (Ito, 2005). When mobile email was first

developed in Japan, it proved very popular with young people because it was silent and led to practices such as sending a written message first to check where the person being contacted was and whether they were free to take a voice call. Although even early research mentioned school rules about mobile use (and resistance to these, such as youth phoning from the school toilets), there have been few studies of such institutional constraints.

Finally, research reflected the fact that mobile phones were themselves evolving since, even before smartphones, mobile phones had become "platforms" for an increasing number of functions. The one that received the most attention was the photo (and, subsequently, video) camera on the mobile phone, with research noting the practice of taking pictures on the phone and posting these images online, sometimes after some process of decoration. This was one early form of youth producing user generated content involving mostly pictures from everyday life (as opposed to special occasions). Some research also noted the shared listening to music on mobile phones and practices of exchanging both audio and visual material via Bluetooth.

Youth and the Internet

There was a pioneering study of the internet in the United States in the mid-1990s that included young people's experiences online (Turkle 1995), and observations about interactions in families with children were made in some general studies of internet use from 1996 to 1998. The first dedicated empirical studies of young people's internet practices, however, were conducted from about 1998 to 2000. This included studies in North America (in the United States and Canada), Europe (in the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Norway), and in Asia (in Singapore and Taiwan), and there was one Israeli study. Apart from descriptions of children's early adoption of online activities, these studies covered themes such as the extent of, and motivations for, identity play (later discussed in relation to young people's self-presentation on social media websites), the consequences of children's use of the internet for sociability, how the offline world influenced

behavior online, and whether internet use displaced time for other activities which were, in turn, responses to some claims and concerns at the time.

The first report on youth and online victimization was published in 2000 and lists of parental concerns and strategies for influencing their children's experiences date from 2001. As regards the particular aspects of the internet that we might conceptualize as social media, the first research on home pages in the United States (predating social networking service [SNS] profiles) was published in 2000, IM (and email) following in 2001, and chat rooms in 2003 – again, the latter two reflected the aspects of the internet that were popular among youth at the time. The first published work on SNSs appeared by 2006, and, of all social media, these sites, especially the more high-profile ones like Myspace and Facebook, are the ones where the social networking practices of youth have been most researched. As a result, there are gaps in the research base as regards practices on other platforms such as virtual worlds (e.g., Habbo Hotel), gaming sites, and audiovisual platforms such as YouTube, even though these often have communications options and the equivalent of profiles.

Although a substantial amount of research on children's internet use concerns what they do online, the offline context in which they live has a bearing on their behavior in virtual spaces. In particular, as in the case of the mobile phone, it is important to consider the influence of parent–child relations. Some of the early research looked at what form of internet access parents granted (or were able to grant) children, in what spaces, and under what time constraints.

As regards the nature of access, the literature on adults' own use has shown the limitations of poorer (i.e., more unreliable, slower) connections, sometimes related to the costs of internet access (especially when pay-per-use tariffs were first used for narrowband access). Although there has been little discussion of how this affected young people's use, it clearly could (e.g., for streaming videos from YouTube nowadays) – and, in part, can – reflect the overall economic circumstances and socioeconomic status of the different households in which children live. Household composition can also be a factor shaping children's experiences where siblings

have to share access to the online world (Horst, 2010).

Bovill and Livingstone's (2001) research in the United Kingdom identified a "bedroom culture" as an increasingly media rich private *space* in which ICTs, including the internet, were being used. One caveat is that sometimes the nature of the housing means there are fewer relatively private spaces from which young people can go online, that is, where they do not have their own bedrooms. This has been noted both in the more recent qualitative studies of poorer households and also in observations about cross-cultural differences – for example, in the lack of private spaces in Japanese homes. Even where children had their own bedrooms, parents were encouraged by parental organizations and government advice to use the location of computers as a means to check and control their children's internet use, for example by putting the personal computer in a shared space like the living room, where its use could be casually and physically monitored by parents. Research in the United Kingdom and the United States has shown that some parents, but by no means all, have adopted this policy. Although there has been little research on the efficacy of this strategy, if any rule breaking, or indeed any intimate communications exchanged between young people, is potentially more visible to their parents, this may have a bearing on how youth behave online. It remains to be seen what impact more portable platforms for access, such as tablets and smartphones, might have in undermining such parental monitoring strategies within the home.

Parents' management of their children's time has, for a long while, received more research attention. Even before the internet, there had been a longstanding concern about ICTs such as TV, games, and even computers taking up "too much" of children's time – taking time away from the other things they could be doing. In contrast to the term "social media," one of the earliest discussions related to concerns about the "asocial" internet, that is, its negative effect on sociability. Although this was a more general debate about all internet users, the discussions included whether internet use specifically encouraged children to spend less time with family members and friends. Even when (adults and) young people used the internet to communicate – that is, to

be sociable – the quality of this interaction was still sometimes seen as inferior to face-to-face interaction with peers (Haddon, 2004).

While many such parental concerns were about their children finding a “balance” in their lives, some parents were more critical of entertainment and communications activities because they distracted children from their educational commitments. Studies repeatedly show one of the key parental rules to be a limit on how much time young people are allowed to spend online overall, and how much time they can spend on particular online activities (e.g., on social networking sites as opposed to looking things up for schoolwork). They also show that parents often try to control the timing of online activities, for example allowing their children to participate in gaming online only after, and as a reward for, doing homework, or allowing no external online communications during “family times,” for example mealtimes.

By 2001, a large empirical study (Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001) in the United States was already listing the other parental concerns under a risk agenda (e.g., meeting strangers, encountering porn) as well as parental mediation strategies (e.g., monitoring what children did online, sitting with them when they were online). One key theme in discussions of parent–children relationships was that of young people’s privacy, specifically privacy from parents (but sometimes also from siblings). Young people had talked about the “invasion of their privacy” when their parents entered their bedrooms without asking, or checked on the histories of their online use in terms of websites visited. In the case of social network sites where youth have constructed very personal spaces, however, when parents seek to find out what is on those spaces, studies suggest that a sense of invasion of privacy is even more acute, and sometimes met by making profiles private to keep parents out (Horst, 2010).

As in the mobile phone literature, a considerable amount of internet research deals with interactions among peers, often citing the same frameworks from the psychology of child development that indicated how important social networks of peers are at this life stage, especially for the formation of identity. Just as in the material looking at social constraints in the case of mobile phone use, a more sociologically

orientated discussion drawing on the social construction of childhood noted that peer relationships had themselves been shaped by age stratification in schooling, increased years of dependency through exclusion from the labor market, and the commercialization of youth (Ito et al., 2010). This was the social context in which young people interacted, and one of the more recent changes in their circumstances was the increasing pressure in some countries like the United Kingdom and the United States to exclude youth-only groups from certain public spaces, such as streets, parks, libraries, and shopping malls (Buckingham, 2000). While, in some countries, there are adult supervised spaces for youth, such as after school sports activities, this is not the same as unsupervised spaces where young people can “negotiate identity, gossip, support one another, jockey for status, collaborate, share information, flirt, joke and goof off” (boyd, 2010, p. 78). Even before social media websites appeared, the metaphor of young people “hanging out” in virtual spaces with their peers had been coined, and this parallel to physically “hanging out” in public spaces was drawn upon in studies of the way SNSs were taken up by youth. This work supported the argument that part of the appeal of the online world in general, including online social media, is that there are fewer opportunities for young people to engage with each other beyond the surveillance of adults in the physical world.

One of the earliest themes explored in research was that of identity play and indeed, at times, many youth have pretended to be someone they are not (usually someone older). But research suggests that this often has been done as a joke, as a means of dealing with requests for personal information, as a way of avoiding adult surveillance, or to open accounts on social network sites like Facebook when the young people are underage (i.e., under 13 years old). In practice it seems that most youth have contact online, especially via SNS, with peers whom they already know offline, or who are at least friends of friends, developing “friendship-driven practices” online (boyd, 2010). In this context they tend to post profiles with real details about their lives (i.e., name, interests, what they are doing). At one stage there had been speculation about the degree to which the internet enabled people, including

youth, to make new online contacts based around communities of interest and develop “interest-driven practices” online. While this happens, for most it appears that online contact via social media supplements (and potentially enhances) relationships offline. One strand of research that began looking at whether SNSs increase (bridging and bonding) social capital subsequently looked specifically at this process in the online social networks of young people.

Perhaps even more so than in the case of texting on mobile phones, from the first studies of IM, chat rooms, and home pages, internet research focused on ways in which the virtual world supported new channels and forms of experimentation and display by young people in the presentation of self and in the formation of identity through the feedback received online. When SNSs appeared, this process continued, arguably expanding because of the greater ease of creating profiles on these sites (compared, e.g., to older home pages and blogs). The affordances of this medium with public and private settings meant that privacy could be controlled (including maintaining privacy from parents). While most of the underlying motivations for young people to communicate in general are not new, it has been repeatedly argued that this more physically disembodied space allows for more flexible and creative forms of sociability (Livingstone, 2009). To put this into perspective, however, the lack of nonverbal clues in the virtual world, as with texting, can also lead young people to prefer to use the phone or face-to-face meetings for certain types of communication.

Communication on social media networks has been characterized as a form of “virtual co-presence,” a “sustained conversation,” again involving “lightweight” communication such as providing status updates on SNSs. It has also been regarded as a continuation of the process whereby young people “keep tabs” on each other (as in the case of texting). While researchers have commented on the gossip and related social dramas that predated the internet, social media, especially social networking sites, through their affordances can make these interactions more visible. Hence they can increase the scope and scale of such acts of drama – for example, arguments and even bullying – in effect amplifying them (boyd, 2010).

Apart from privacy from parents, privacy online in general was another early theme in internet research, although when first investigated in a 1998 study in the United States, this concerned children giving personal information to commercial companies. Attention subsequently turned to what information youth made public about themselves, both narrowly in terms of personal details that identified them offline (relevant for the dangers involved in meeting strangers) and, more broadly, in terms of what they were willing to reveal about themselves which could have subsequent implications for their reputations. In the eyes of media commentators, parents, and some researchers, young people sometimes seemed to reveal more about themselves than previous generations. Yet studies have noted that while they provide enough information to remain interesting to visitors and, sometimes, to create a sense of intimacy, young people in practice often have a refined sense of privacy, expressing a concern, for example, about who should see what they post. In this respect, the simplified SNS notion of “friends” who can access profiles does not do justice to the more refined gradations of friendship with which youth operate offline (Livingstone, 2009).

The Risk Agenda

The literature on youth and the internet, perhaps more than that on mobile phones, provides examples of the benefits from and opportunities related to social media, including creativity, developing more social skills, and facilitating socializing among young people. However, such positive comments are sometimes a precursor to listing concerns about what young people experience online. This has been framed in terms of the concept of “risk.” There is a substantial body of writing about potential negative aspects of youth online, but to put that in perspective, researchers have pointed out that these echo a long history of concerns about youth generally, and, specifically, about their experience of each new ICT (Critcher, 2008).

The mobile phone literature from time to time touched upon potentially negative practices such as using mobiles to video “happy slapping” events (hitting someone to get a reaction and

then posting the video online) and tensions around taking “embarrassing” still pictures with the phone, posting them, and teasing the victim about it. But it is mainly in relation to the internet that worries about children’s experiences online have been raised. Although this research includes academic studies, the literature also has institutional support from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other bodies interested more generally in children’s safety or behavior to others (e.g., Save the Children, Anti-Bullying Alliance). These bodies have commissioned research to show the extent and consequences of potential problems, conducted awareness programs, and organized training to raise their public visibility. In Europe, state and regional governments have also supported such initiatives. The most influential support was from the European Commission’s Safer Internet Programme (with the Family Online Safety Institute, a private sector-led initiative, being the equivalent national focal body in the United States). As it moved to more evidence based policy, the European Commission program commissioned research involving the academic community (in the European Union Kids Online Project: www.eukifdsonline.net) both as a basis for negotiating with the relevant parts of the internet industry but also to develop a critical assessment of potential issues, in contrast to the moral panic style of reporting that sometimes appears in the media.

A wide variety of disparate concerns had been voiced about online dangers to “children” (occasionally to “youth”). One issue, voiced about previous ICTs such as TVs and home computers, concerned time spent online. In its most acute form this was framed in terms of internet “addiction,” although many researchers resist the medicalization of the issue implied by that term. The key focus in this research is not just the sheer amount of time spent online, but whether, in some sense, use becomes obsessive, and even young people have sometimes noted how tempting social media like Facebook can be. Hence one focus is on aspects of the internet that are very engaging, such as gaming, or various SNSs.

The EU Kids Online research drew up a typology of the concerns, classifying them as content, contact, and conduct issues. This has been adopted widely in the research community, even

though there are gray areas between the three terms (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). Content (such as seeing pornography or violence online) was at one stage largely related to the World Wide Web, but young people encountering especially violent content on YouTube also has made it an issue for social media.

There has been a longstanding concern about the contact issue with respect to firms marketing to children online, including on social media sites. The most high-profile contact issue is being “groomed” by strangers and worries about pedophiles, although contact also encompasses being harassed. While potentially serious in its consequences, such grooming is relatively rare and US research has shown that youth interact with unknown others usually with very few negative outcomes (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2008).

The most high-profile conduct issue, covering what potentially negative things children do themselves online, is cyberbullying others, but conduct may also include hacking (often experienced as others getting into young people’s accounts and sending messages pretending to be from the victim) and sexting (which has multiple definitions, but often means young people, for whatever reason, sending each other sexual images of themselves).

The relevance for social media is that contact and conduct issues can occur in and through virtual places where youth socialize, hence the earliest concern was about chat rooms. As they went out of fashion, attention shifted to the risks of social networking sites, as these are the more popular online spaces among young people. One US report, discussing some of these issues under the heading of “victimization,” appeared in 2000 (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000), but much of the research related to these concerns was published from about 2005.

Although there had been research on rules set by parents related to use of the fixed telephone in the mid-1990s, studies dealing specifically with what later was termed “parental mediation” appear in 2001 and cover a range of ICTs such as TV, phones, and home computers. While this strand of research is principally concerned with the different strategies used by parents to mediate their children’s experiences of technologies, and now social media, it has also addressed related

issues. These include how much parents actually know about how ICTs work, how much they know about their children's experiences online, especially negative experiences, and how the children react to the interest shown or rules set by parents.

With the arrival of internet based social media, the list of research questions expanded to cover whether parents electronically monitor what their children do, whether they technologically block or restrict certain activities or specifically examine safety issues. The results of that research have shown how finding out about what their children do, especially talking to the children, is still a key form of parental mediation along with rule making, especially for younger youth, the main rule being about the disclosure of personal information. Research focusing on how ICTs mediate these relationships also expanded to ask whether other agents, such as peers and teachers, could play a mediating role and it seems that in the case of some sensitive experiences, young people often choose to discuss any problems with peers slightly more than they do with parents.

As the technology has developed, so too has the risk agenda. In the mid-2000s, when the mobile phone first enabled internet access, there was some policy discussion and related research on whether this increased risks because it increased young people's ability to evade their parents' surveillance when they went online. At the time, the cost of doing so meant that young people generally used the mobile phone very little to access the internet. Five years later, the appearance and growth in popularity of smartphones among youth led to another wave of research, mostly focused on the implications of mobile access to the internet, including social media like SNSs, in terms of whether this increased risks or led to new ones (e.g., in relation to the location applications on smartphones).

Conclusions

Social media in the narrower sense have their own specific affordances and histories; for example, SNSs achieved far greater popularity among youth than earlier home pages ever did, and this had consequences for the amplification of social drama. In the face of constant claims, however,

about the radical newness of each new technology or service, ICT researchers often find precursors to emphasize the continuities that exist with what has gone before. When domesticating new ICTs (Silverstone, 2005), people in general often build on their experiences of older ICTs, and this entry has indicated that this also holds true for youth.

Taking a wider view of social media, there are continuities in the practices developed by youth, in concerns shown about youth and technologies and in the research themes, research questions asked, frameworks used, and characterizations of social processes, as in repeated discussions of "lightweight" communications dating from early mobile phone studies. An important aspect highlighted by this work is that we need to appreciate the context in which young children go online to understand the issues and practices and, specifically, the sometimes changing circumstances in which they live their lives in the offline world.

SEE ALSO: Children, Protection of; One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) Strategy; Online Games, Addiction and Overuse of; Online Games and Children; Online Games, Effects of; Privacy and Social Media; Social Media; Social Media and Literacy; Social Media Ownership; Social Media and Social Capital

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