October 2006

Adolescents and the Internet

by Nathalie Louge

"The Internet is transforming the experience of growing up in America. It is also transforming the job of being a parent in America. The Internet brings the world — the good, the bad, and the ugly — to the American family's doorstep. It brings the ruins of ancient Athens to that doorstep, but it also brings the red light district of Bangkok."
(Third Way Culture Project, 2005).

Established only a few decades ago, the Internet is a system of enormous technical and social complexity. It comprises a gigantic but almost invisible universe that includes thousands of networks, millions of computers, and billions of users across the world (Greenfield & Yan, 2006). Computer access and use among adolescents and other age brackets have grown exponentially over the past decade. More than 80% of American youth, ages 12 to 17, use the Internet, and nearly half log on daily (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). Although little research has been conducted on the effects of the Internet on various aspects of human development, the role of computers and the Internet as a means for socialization, education, information access, entertainment, shopping, and communication is increasing dramatically. Many adolescents reportedly prefer being online to other media, including the telephone, TV, and radio. Given that so many adolescents are spending so much time on the Internet, it is essential to be aware of its impact on adolescent behavior, well-being, and development.

Understanding the Teen Online World

It is critical to view the Internet as a new social environment in which universal adolescent issues pertaining to identity formation, sexuality, and self-worth are explored in a virtual world (Subrahmanyam et al.). As a social context, the Internet enables multiple communication functions, such as e-mail, instant messaging (IM), chat, and blogs, to allow adolescents to participate and co-construct their own environments (Greenfield & Yan, 2006). According to data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the vast majority (89%) of teens use e-mail; 75% use IM, which allows them to have multiple simultaneous conversations with a defined group of peers. Over 50% of teens possess more than one e-mail address or screen name, which they can use to send private messages to friends or to participate anonymously in online forums, such as chat rooms (Lenhart et al., 2005).

Easy and continuous access to the Internet provides tremendous opportunities for adolescent socialization, allowing them to connect with their peers as well as with complete strangers from across the world. Clearly, the Internet is transforming the social world of adolescents by influencing

how they communicate, establish and maintain relationships, and find social support. Therefore, it is essential to gain awareness of both the potential benefits and risks of teen Internet use, and provide strategies to guide safe and positive practice.

Benefits of Teen Internet Use

As a complex medium of communication, the Internet provides the possibility of small, intimate social environments geared towards faster or "instant" communication. At the same time, the networks can be very large offering global access to its users. This global network allows for American teens to connect with those in Botswana or any "wired" area in the world. This propels the development of youth leadership, communication, socialization, information, and learning to an international scale. For example, teens in Accra, Ghana use the Internet as a source of health information in order to gain the necessary information on both sexual and general health issues that they would probably not have access to in their own local environment (Cassell et al, 2006).

Research on American youth shows that the Internet serves as a powerful resource for information about socially sensitive topics such as sex and interpersonal relations (Suzuki & Calzo, 2004); it also serves as a community-building tool providing information on civic engagement and political participation (Rainie & Horrigan, 2005). Studies have shown that through Internet communication, youth are given the opportunity to exercise leadership skills and become stakeholders in communities that they themselves have created. This encourages autonomy and identity construction free of norms and expectations. Despite fears of stalkers and inappropriate sites, parents are beginning to recognize the Internet as a powerful tool for both networking, and academic enhancement for their children. A recent study found that low-income youth who consistently used the Internet exhibited higher grade point averages over the course of time (Jackson et al., 2006) than less frequent users.

Some evidence suggests that Internet communication may be especially advantageous for shy, socially anxious, or marginalized youth, enabling them to practice social skills without the risks associated with face-to-face interactions (Heitner, 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Subrahmanyam et al., 2004). Additionally, online communication may encourage more truthful exchanges: many people report a greater willingness to share thoughts and feelings online than they would in person (Lenhart et al., 2001; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). This freedom from social pressures may help adolescents build more confidence in real social situations and can elicit a sense of connection to others, an important aspect in adolescent social development. On the other hand, this lack of "on the ground" interactions may pose risks for teens, especially those who are socially anxious.

Risk Factors of Teens Internet Use

Although the Internet has consistent positive impacts on modern society, it has also caused various societal concerns about privacy, security, pornography, Internet crime, and virtual community (Greenfield & Yan, 2006). Its easy accessibility poses greater risks and dangers for youth as compared to other forms of media. According to the National Altitudinal Poll, the number one media concern for parents has shifted from television to the Internet: 85% of parents reported that among all forms of media, the Internet posed the greatest risk to their children (Common Sense Media, 2006). Parental concerns are valid, especially considering that teens are essentially free to view and post whatever they choose and communicate with whomever they want.

Hand in hand with this, the Internet has become a highly effective and profitable means of distributing sexually explicit material, as well as a sophisticated channel for compulsive sexual behavior, sex trafficking, and sex crimes (Galbreath & Berlin, 2002). According to a survey performed by the London School of Economics (2002), 90% of children between ages 8 and 16 have viewed pornography on the Internet. In most cases, the sex sites were accessed unintentionally when

a child, often in the process of doing homework, used an innocuous word to search for information or pictures. Such free access and exposure to this information by adolescents who have not yet developed a full maturity could pose negative impacts on adolescent development and could potentially manifest in their social interactions with peers, their sexual activity, and their emotional development (Subrahmanyam et al., 2006).

In addition, free and sometimes anonymous communication through chat rooms, blogs, and IM pose risks to teens. Recent studies have shown that adolescents form virtual communities to support unhealthy behavior including self-injury and eating disorders (Whitlock et al, 2006). Analysis of chat conversations suggests that chat participants often resort to the age/sex/location chat code to share identity information. A nationwide poll showed that half of teens ages 13-18 often communicate through the Internet with someone they have not met in person; one-third have talked about potentially meeting someone face-to-face whom they have only met through the Internet (Polly Klaas Foundation, 2006). Further, almost 12.5% discovered that someone they were communicating with online was an adult pretending to be much younger. Fake identities are easy to produce and to sell on the Internet. Teens will often create personal pages where they can make up or post their real identities, personal profiles, and pictures on websites such as Myspace and the Facebook. This poses a safety risk since it is difficult to discern someone's "real" identity over the Internet. In addition, a national poll revealed that 54% of girls reported they could be online without their parents' knowledge and have been involved in some sort of cyber relationship (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2002). As long as this online culture grows in popularity and socializing continues to be a priority for teens, safety will be an issue.

Moreover, creating fake identities deters from "real life" social situations as it allows for individuals to create any image of themselves with little or no social repercussions. Thus, although the Internet may serve as a catalyst for communication and may increase social competence of socially anxious teens, it may also encourage fake identities and a false image of real life situations. These socially anxious teens may have a tendency to resort to computer communication as a substitute for real life interactions (Subrahmanyam et al., 2006).

STRATEGIES: Guidance for Positive Internet Use

As technology continues to expand access to the Internet, use among teens is inevitable. Consequently, rather than focussing on censorship of teen use; we must look for strategies to encourage safer and more positive operation of this complex system. Some potential strategies include:

◆ A federal law, The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) requires websites to explain their privacy policies on the site and obtain parental consent before collecting or using a minor's personal information, such as a name, address, phone number, or social security number. The law also prohibits a site from requiring youth to provide more personal information than necessary to play a game or contest. For more information: *www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/cipa.html*.

◆ Parents and educators can place Internet filters that inhibit access to inappropriate sites such as pornographic sites. Adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health information is minimally affected by pornography-blocking software. For example, only 5% of online health information was filtered out by pornography-blocking software when installed at moderate settings while blocking 90% of pornographic content. For more information: *www.wiredsafety.org*.

◆ Many sites use "cookies," devices that track specific information about the user, such as name, email address, and shopping preferences. Cookies can be disabled. Ask your Internet service provider for more information. For more information: *www.internet-filters.net*.

◆ Parents and educators can educate themselves about the Internet. For more information: *www.commonsense.com*.

◆ Parents should not be afraid to monitor their teen's use of the Internet. Tracking programs can be purchased to access previously visited sites.

◆ Keep the computer in a common area, not in individual bedrooms, where you can watch and monitor your teen.

◆ Parents should become involved in their teens Internet life. Perhaps acquire a screen name and chat with their teen online. This will allow parents to be on the same page as their teens.

◆ A number of schools have incorporated media literacy into their curriculum in order to educate kids about the risks and benefits of Internet use. These programs will often show kids how to identify deceiving information and to never fully trust any non-accredited website. For more information:

   www.protectkids.com/dangers/stats.htm#youth.

References

Cassell, J., Huffaker, D., Tversky, D., & Ferriman, K. (2006). The language of online leadership: Gender and youth engagement on the Internet. Applied Developmental Psychology, 42, 436-449

Common Sense Media

Galbreath, N. & Berlin, F. (2002). Paraphilias and the Internet. In A. Cooper (Ed.), Sex and the Internet: A guidebook for clinicians (pp. 187–205). New York: Brunner Routledge.

Girl Scout Research Institute (2002). The Net Effect: Girls and New Media <www.girlscouts.org/research/publications/original/net_effect.asp>

Greenfield, P. & Yan, Z. (2006). Children, adolescents, and the Internet: A new field of inquiry in developmental psychology. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 42 (3), 391-394

Jackson, L.A., Von Eye, A., Biocca, F.A., Barbatsis, G., Zhao, Y., & Fitzgerald, H.E. (2006). Does home Internet use influence the academic performance of low-income children? Journal of Developmental Psychology, 42, 429-435.

Lenhart, A., Madden, M., & Hitlin, P. (2005, July 27). Teens and technology: You are leading the transition to a fully wired and mobile nation. Retrieved October 12, 2005, from www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Tech_July2005web.pdf

Livingstone, S. (2002). *Children's Use of the Internet: A Literature Review*, Report to the National Children's Bureau. Available from <www.ncb.org.uk/feature/Internet>

McKenna, K.Y.A., & Bargh, J.A. (2000). Plan 9 from Cyberspace: The implications of the Internet for personality and social psychology. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 4, 57-75.

McKenna, K.Y.A., Green, A., & Gleason, M. (2002). Relationship formation on the Internet: What's the big attraction? Journal of Social Issues, 58, 9-31.

Polly Klaas Foundation (2006) <www.pollyklaas.org/Internet-safety/Internet-pdfs/PollingSummary.pdf>

Rainie, L., & Horrigan, J. (2005). A decade of adoption: How the Internet has woven itself into American life. Washington DC: Pew Internet and Family Life.

Subrahmanyam, K., Greenfield, P.M., & Tynes, B. (2004). Constructing sexuality and identity in an online teen chat room. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 25, 651-666.

Suzuki, L.K., & Calzo, J.P. (2004). The search for peer advice in cyberspace: An examination of online teen bulletin boards about health and sexuality. Applied Developmental Psychology, 25, 685-698.

Third Way Culture Project. (2005). The porn standard: Children and pornography on the Internet. Retrieved August 3, 2005, from <www.thirdway.com/products/THE_PORN_STANDARD.pdf>

Whitlock, J.L., Powers, J.L., & Eckenrode, J. (2006). The virtual cutting edge: The Internet and adolescent self-injury. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 42, 407-417.