**The impact of digital technology of the social lives of youths**

The question of how the Internet and other new technologies are affecting the social lives of youth is debated. **Brignall** suggests that there are two main rival views:

1. New technologies create a ‘hyper-connectivity’ that widens and will potentially revolutionize social interactions.

Some researchers have argued that new communications technologies help to facilitate communication and allow people to reach other people quickly and in multiple ways.

1. Internet culture fosters more isolation and disconnection among youth

Connections carried out through digital media are not as intimate and satisfying as face-to-face interactions.

**Support for view 1:**

**Wellman et al** examine evidence from three studies done at the NetLab (a scholarly network based at the University of Toronto, which studies the intersection of social, communication and computer networks) to conclude that Internet does not decrease or destroy community, but rather, that it transforms community. They found that heavy Internet users have become “**glocalized**”—involved in local and long-distance relationships. However, whilst they connecting globally, they may be less aware of their immediate surroundings and nearby relationships.

**Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe** discuss the importance of social networking sites for maintaining relationships and ***social capital*** as people are able to stay connected across geographic distances, for example, when they move or go to college: “*online interactions do not necessarily remove people from their offline world but may indeed be used to support relationships and keep people in contact, even when life changes move them away from each other*”.

They also suggest that for those who lack social skills or connections, the Internet can have a positive impact: “*The Internet might help individuals with low psychological well-being due to few ties to friends and neighbours. Some forms of computer-mediated communication can lower barriers to interaction and encourage more self disclosure.*” This suggests that for some people, having a screen between them and the people they are communicating with can create greater social confidence.

**Support for view 2:**

**Brignall** focuses on “***current cyber-youth***”— those who have grown up with the Internet as an important part of their everyday life. He argues that due to the pervasive use of the Internet in education, communication and entertainment, there has been a decrease in the face-to-face interaction. This may have “*significant consequences for their development of social skills and their presentation of self*”. Brignall recognizes some positive aspects of Internet, but emphasizes the negative consequences of extensive Internet use, including “*dysfunctional behaviour, a lack of community, less privacy, a weakened democracy, and social isolation*”. Cyber-youth may be developing new social skills that are relevant to online interaction, but at the expense of face-to-face social interaction skills.

**References:**

**Brignall, Thomas W. (2005)** “The Impact of Internet Communications on Social Interaction.” *Sociological Spectrum.* 25: 335-348.

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**The impact of social media on children, adolescents and families: O’Keefe and Clarke-Pearson (2011)**

**Background:** this is an American study carried out by 2 paediatricians relating to the positive and negative effects of the use of social media on young people. It does have a health and a US focus, but raises some interesting issues, so could provide some useful evidence in terms of the positive and negative impacts of digital forms of communications.

**Summary of arguments:**

**BENEFITS OF CHILDREN AND** **ADOLESCENTS USING SOCIAL** **MEDIA**

**Socialization and Communication:** Social media sites allow teens to stay connected with friends and family, make new friends, share pictures, and exchange ideas. Social media participation also can offer adolescents deeper benefits that extend into their view of self, community, and the world, including:

* opportunities for community engagement through raising money for charity and volunteering for local events, including political and philanthropic events;
* enhancement of individual and collective creativity through development and sharing of artistic and musical endeavours;
* growth of ideas from the creation of blogs, podcasts, videos, and gaming sites;
* expansion of one’s online connections through shared interests to include others from more diverse backgrounds.

Other benefits include enhanced learning opportunities (using social media for school projects and research), and access to health information.

**RISKS OF YOUTH USING SOCIAL MEDIA**

**Cyberbullying:** Cyberbullying is deliberately using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing, or hostile information about another person. Cyberbullying is quite common, can occur to any young person online, and can cause profound psychosocial outcomes including depression, anxiety, severe isolation and suicide.

**Sexting:** Sexting can be defined as “sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via phone, computer, or other digital devices.” Many of these images become distributed rapidly via phones or the Internet. This phenomenon does occur among the teen population; a recent survey revealed that 20% of teens have sent or posted nude or semi-nude photographs or videos of themselves.

**Facebook Depression:** Researchers have proposed a new phenomenon called “Facebook depression,” defined as depression that develops when preteens and teens spend a great deal of time on social media sites, such as Facebook, and then begin to exhibit classic symptoms of depression. Acceptance by and contact with peers is an important element of adolescent life. The intensity of the online world is thought to be a factor that may trigger depression in some adolescents.

**Privacy concerns and the digital footprint:** The main risks to young people online today are risks from each other, risks of improper use of technology, lack of privacy, sharing too much information, or posting false information about themselves or others. An important threat to young people on social media sites is to their digital footprint and future reputations. They may post inappropriate messages, pictures, and videos without understanding that “what goes online stays online.” As a result, future jobs and education may be put into jeopardy. Indiscriminate Internet activity also can make children and teenagers easier for marketers and fraudsters to target.

**Influence of advertisements on buying:** Many social media sites display multiple advertisements such as banner ads, behaviour ads (ads that target people on the basis of their Web-browsing behaviour), and demographic-based ads (ads that target people on the basis of a specific factor such as age, gender, education, marital status, etc) that influence not only the buying tendencies of children and young people but also their views of what is normal.

**The impact of the Internet on society: A Global perspective – Manuel Castells (2015)**

*Below is a summary of Castells recent article on the impact of the Internet. He presents a positive view regarding the global impact which the Internet is having. He is often characterized as a Marxist, but also has some postmodern leanings I think. I have slightly edited his own summary to signpost key points (the subheadings are mine). If you want the original summary or the whole article, I can email them to you. If you search for Castells (e.g. look at Wikipedia) there are links to many of his recent works which are really relevant to this topic.*

**Castells** argues that the Internet is the decisive technology of the Information Age - ‘*we can say that humankind is now almost entirely connected, albeit with* ***great levels of inequality*** *in bandwidth, efficiency, and price.’*

**Myths & fears**: People, companies, and institutions feel the depth of technological change, but the speed and scope of the transformation has triggered all manner of utopian and dystopian perceptions that, when examined closely, turn out not to be accurate. For instance, media often report that intense use of the Internet increases the risk of isolation, alienation, and withdrawal from society, but available evidence shows that the ***Internet neither isolates people nor reduces their sociability***; it actually increases sociability, civic engagement, and the intensity of family and friendship relationships, in all cultures.

**“Me-centered society”:** Our current “network society” is a product of the digital revolution and some major sociocultural changes. One of these is the rise of the **“Me-centered society,”** marked by an increased focus on individual growth and a decline in community understood in terms of space, work, family. But ***individuation does not mean isolation***, or the end of community. Instead, ***social relationships are being reconstructed*** on the basis of individual interests, values, and projects. Community is formed through individuals’ quests for like-minded people in a process that combines online interaction with offline interaction, cyberspace, and the local space.

**Virtuality:** Today, social networking sites are the preferred platforms for all kinds of activities, both business and personal, and ***sociability has dramatically increased — but it is a different kind of sociability***. The virtual life is becoming more social than the physical life, but it is less a virtual reality than ***a real virtuality***, facilitating real-life work and urban living.

**Freedom:** Because people are increasingly at ease in the Web’s multidimensionality, marketers, government, and civil society are migrating massively to the networks people construct by themselves and for themselves. At root, social-networking entrepreneurs are really selling spaces in which ***people can freely and autonomously construct their lives***. Sites that attempt to impede free communication are soon abandoned by many users in favor of friendlier and less restricted spaces.

**Empowering people politically:** Perhaps the most telling expression of this new freedom is the Internet’s transformation of sociopolitical practices. Messages no longer flow solely from the few to the many, with little interactivity. Now, messages also flow ***from the many to the many***, multimodally and interactively. Horizontal communication networks can bypass government and corporate control of communication creating a new landscape of social and political change. Networked social movements have been particularly active since 2010, notably in the Arab revolutions against dictatorships and the protests against the management of the financial crisis.

**Conclusion:** The Internet and the Web constitute the technological infrastructure of the global network society, and the understanding of their logic is a key field of research. It is only scholarly research that will enable us to cut through the myths surrounding this digital communication technology that is already a second skin for young people, yet continues to feed the fears and the fantasies of those who are still in charge of a society that they barely understand