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Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project

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Research Summary

Over three years, University of California, Irvine researcher Mizuko Ito and her team interviewed over 800 youth and young adults and conducted over 5000 hours of online observations as part of the most extensive U.S. study of youth media use.

They found that social network and video-sharing sites, online games, and gadgets such as iPods and mobile phones are now fixtures of youth culture. The research shows that today's youth may be coming of age and struggling for autonomy and identity amid new worlds for communication, friendship, play, and self-expression.

Many adults worry that children are wasting time online, texting, or playing video games. The researchers explain why youth find these activities compelling and important. The digital world is creating new opportunities for youth to grapple with social norms, explore interests, develop technical skills, and experiment with new forms of self-expression. These activities have captured teens' attention because they provide avenues for extending social worlds, self-directed learning, and independence.

Major Findings

YOUTH USE ONLINE MEDIA TO EXTEND FRIENDSHIPS AND INTERESTS.

Most youth use online networks to extend the friendships that they navigate in the familiar contexts of school, religious organizations, sports, and other local activities. They can be "always on," in constant contact with their friends through private communications like instant messaging or mobile phones, as well as in public ways through social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook. With these "friendship-driven" practices, youth are almost always associating with people they already know in their offline lives. The majority of youth use new media to "hang out" and extend existing friendships in these ways.

A smaller number of youth also use the online world to explore interests and find information that goes beyond what they have access to at school or in their local community. Online groups enable youth to connect to peers who share specialized and niche interests of various kinds, whether that is online gaming, creative writing, video editing, or other artistic endeavors. In these interest-driven networks, youth may find new peers outside the boundaries of their local community. They can also find opportunities to publicize and distribute their work to online audiences, and to gain new forms of visibility and reputation.

YOUTH ENGAGE IN PEER-BASED, SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING ONLINE.
In both friendship-driven and interest-driven online activity, youth create and navigate new forms of expression

and rules for social behavior. By exploring new interests, tinkering, and “messing around” with new forms of media, they acquire various forms of technical and media literacy. Through trial and error, youth add new media skills to their repertoire, such as how to create a video or game, or customize their MySpace page. Teens then share their creations and receive feedback from others online. By its immediacy and breadth of information, the digital world lowers barriers to self-directed learning.

Some youth “geek out” and dive into a topic or talent. Contrary to popular images, geeking out is highly social and engaged, although usually not driven primarily by local friendships. Youth turn instead to specialized knowledge groups of both teens and adults from around the country or world, with the goal of improving their craft and gaining reputation among expert peers. While adults participate, they are not automatically the resident experts by virtue of their age. Geeking out in many respects erases the traditional markers of status and authority.

New media allow for a degree of freedom and autonomy for youth that is less apparent in a classroom setting. Youth respect one another’s authority online, and they are often more motivated to learn from peers than from adults. Their efforts are also largely self-directed, and the outcome emerges through exploration, in contrast to classroom learning that is oriented by set, predefined goals.

Implications

New media forms have altered how youth socialize and learn, and raise a new set of issues that educators, parents, and policymakers should consider.

ADULTS SHOULD FACILITATE YOUNG PEOPLE’S ENGAGEMENT WITH DIGITAL MEDIA.

Contrary to adult perceptions, while hanging out online, youth are picking up basic social and technical skills they need to fully participate in contemporary society. Erecting barriers to participation deprives teens of access to these forms of learning. Participation in the digital age means more than being able to access serious online information and culture. Youth could benefit from educa-

tors being more open to forms of experimentation and social exploration that are generally not characteristic of educational institutions.

GIVEN THE DIVERSITY OF DIGITAL MEDIA, IT IS PROBLEMATIC TO DEVELOP A STANDARDIZED SET OF BENCHMARKS AGAINST WHICH TO MEASURE YOUNG PEOPLE’S TECHNICAL AND NEW MEDIA LITERACY. Friendship-driven and interest-driven online participation have very different kinds of social connotations. For example, whereas friendship-driven activities center upon peer culture, adult participation is more welcomed in the latter more “geeky” forms of learning. In addition, the content, behavior, and skills that youth value are highly variable depending on with which social groups they associate.

IN INTEREST-DRIVEN PARTICIPATION, ADULTS HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY.

Youth using new media often learn from their peers, not teachers or adults. Yet adults can still have tremendous influence in setting learning goals, particularly on the interest-driven side where adult hobbyists function as role models and more experienced peers.

TO STAY RELEVANT IN THE 21ST CENTURY, EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS NEED TO KEEP PACE WITH THE RAPID CHANGES INTRODUCED BY DIGITAL MEDIA.

Youths’ participation in this networked world suggests new ways of thinking about the role of education. *What, the authors ask, would it mean to really exploit the potential of the learning opportunities available through online resources and networks? What would it mean to reach beyond traditional education and civic institutions and enlist the help of others in young people’s learning?* Rather than assuming that education is primarily about preparing for jobs and careers, they question what it would mean to think of it as a process guiding youths’ participation in public life more generally.

More Information

More information about the study and the MacArthur Foundation’s digital media and learning initiative can be found online at www.digitalllearning.macfound.org/ethnography.