

Kids online: parents, don't panic

It used to be the shopping centre or park bench – now teens spend hours hanging out on Snapchat or Instagram. Don't worry: they're just forging their own brave new world



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'Any new technology that captures widespread attention is likely to provoke serious hand-wringing.'

One evening, in September 2010, I was in the stands at a high school football game in Nashville, Tennessee, experiencing a powerful sense of déjà vu. As a member of my high school's marching band in the mid-90s, I had spent countless Friday nights pretending to cheer on the football team so that I could hang out with my friends. As I sat in the stands, I thought: the more things had changed, the more they seemed the same.

Most of the student body was seated, but they were barely paying attention to what was happening on the field. They were facing one another, chatting, enjoying a rare chance to spend unstructured time together.

By and large, the students were cordoned off in their own section on the sides of the stands, while parents and more "serious" fans occupied the seats in the centre. Only two things confirmed that this was not 1994: the fashion and the phones. As far as I could tell, every teen

had one: iPhones, BlackBerrys and other high-end smartphones. What was surprising, at least to most adults, was how little the teens actually used them as phones. They took photos, and many were texting frantically while trying to find one another in the crowd. Once they connected, the texting often stopped. On the few occasions when a phone did ring, the typical response was an exasperated "Mum!" or "Dad!" – a parent calling to check in, an unwanted interruption. And even though many teens are frequent texters, they were not directing most of their attention to their devices. When they did look at their phones, they were often sharing the screen with the person sitting next to them, reading or viewing something together.

The parents were paying much more attention to their devices. I couldn't tell whether they were checking email or simply supplementing the football game with other content, being either bored or distracted. But many adults were staring into their devices intently, barely looking up when a touchdown was scored. And, unlike the teens, they weren't sharing their devices with others or taking photos.

I had come here to better understand how [social media](#) and other technologies had changed teens' lives. I had spent my own teen years online, and was among the first generation of teens who did so. But few of my friends in the early 90s were interested in computers. The [internet](#) presented me with a bigger world, a world populated by people who shared my idiosyncratic interests and were ready to discuss them at any time, day or night. I grew up in an era in which going online – or "jacking in" – was an escape mechanism, and I desperately wanted to escape.

The teens I have met over the past few years are attracted to popular social media for entirely different reasons. Unlike me and the other early adopters who avoided our local community by hanging out in chatrooms and bulletin boards, most teenagers now go online to connect to the people in their community. Their online participation is not eccentric; it is entirely normal, even expected.

The day after the football game, I interviewed a girl who had been there. We went through her Facebook page, where she showed me various photos from the night before. Facebook hadn't been on her mind during the game, but as soon as she got home, she uploaded her photos, tagged her friends and started commenting on others' photos. The status updates were filled with references to conversations that took place at the game. Although she couldn't physically hang out with her friends after the game ended, she used Facebook to stay connected after the stands had cleared.

Some years ago, when [Myspace](#) was at the height of its popularity, I talked to 18-year-old Skyler, who told me that being on Myspace was essential to her social life. "If you're not on Myspace, you don't exist," she explained. Each cohort of teens has a different space that it decides is cool. It used to be the shopping centre; today [WhatsApp](#), [Vine](#), [Tumblr](#), [Snapchat](#) and [Instagram](#) are the cool places. Even the ever popular [Facebook](#) has begun to fade. And while the spaces may change, the organising principles stay the same.



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Any new technology that captures widespread attention is likely to provoke serious hand-wringing, if not full-blown panic. Those who created comic books, penny arcades and rock'n'roll have been seen as sinister figures bent on seducing children into becoming juvenile delinquents. A great deal of the fear and anxiety that surrounds young people's use of social media stems from misunderstanding. All too often, it is easier to focus on the technology because technical changes are easier to see. Many adults are simultaneously afraid of teens and afraid for them. Consider, for example, the widespread concern over internet addiction. Are there teens who have an unhealthy relationship with technology? Certainly. But most of those who are "addicted" to their phones or computers are actually focused on staying connected to friends in a culture where getting together in person can be highly constrained. Although many adults think otherwise, teens' engagement with public life through social media is not a rejection of privacy. They want to gossip, flirt, complain, compare notes, share passions, emote and joke around. They want to be able to talk among themselves – even if that means going online.

As parents' fears increase, and young people's schedules get busier, teenagers simply have far fewer places to be together in public than they once did. The success of social media must be understood partly in relation to this shrinking social landscape. Social network sites are in many cases the only "public" spaces in which teens can easily congregate with large groups of their peers. More significantly, teens can gather in them while still physically stuck at home.

Many parents go to great lengths to get their children off social media, particularly when they're concerned about how often or in what ways their children are using these sites. Last year, a father paid his 14-year-old daughter \$200 to deactivate her Facebook account for five months. After a teen girl in North Carolina used Facebook to complain about her father in 2012, he responded by posting an irate video on YouTube in which he reads a letter he wrote to his daughter and then fires a gun at his daughter's laptop. These are admittedly extreme responses.

I often hear parents complain that their children prefer computers to "real" people. Meanwhile, the teens I met repeatedly indicated that they would much rather get together with friends in person. Teens and parents have different ideas of what socialising should look like. Whereas parents often highlighted the classroom, after-school activities and prearranged at-home visits as opportunities for teens to gather with friends, teens were more interested in informal gatherings with broader groups of peers, free from adult surveillance. Many parents felt as though teens had plenty of social opportunities whereas the teens felt the opposite.

Childhood has changed. Many teens know few young people their age who live within walking distance. Many of the teens I met believed that danger lurked everywhere. They often echoed concerns presented by their parents. Natalie, 15, told me that she understands why her parents do not allow her to walk anywhere, but she wishes that the world were not so dangerous. She genuinely believes that the risks her peers face are unprecedented.

Many teens, particularly those from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, have limited free time, due to after-school activities, jobs and family expectations. They spend most of their days and nights doing sports, attending clubs, having music lessons and so on. Amy, 16, uses Myspace to socialise because her mobility is curtailed. Every day after school she goes straight home, where she feeds her younger sister, helps her with her homework and does household chores. Amy makes it clear that she doesn't prefer hanging out with friends online but feels that technology provides a rare opportunity to connect even when she can't leave the house. When I ask her what she'd rather do, she says, "Just go anywhere. I don't care where, just not home. Somewhere with my friends, just out hanging out." Resigned to the fact that this is not feasible, she spends as much time online as possible. As she explains, "My mum doesn't let me out of the house very often, so that's pretty much all I do, is I sit on Myspace and talk to people and text and talk on the phone, 'cause my mum's always got some crazy reason to keep me in the house."

Social media introduces new opportunities for housebound teens to socialise and people-watch, but it also provides an opportunity to relax. Serious students, like 16-year-old friends Sasha and Bianca, emphasized to me the need for social downtime. Sasha described her daily schedule: "I'll study for a couple of hours and then I'll talk to my friends for a couple of hours or whatever, and that just helps refocus my mind and helps me absorb the information more than just constantly studying." Bianca chimed in: "My brain has to stop taking in all the information." She needed time to just "relax for a while". Both of these teens were diligent students, and they saw socializing as an important complement to their hard work, a mechanism of rejuvenation.

When I asked what they gained from these online interactions, Bianca highlighted the opportunity to learn "social skills". "You learn how to deal with different situations and different people, and just to work with people that you don't like so much. So it just helps you."



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When teens interact with others, they engage in tremendous informal learning, developing a sense of who they are in relation to others. Being "addicted" to information and people is part of the human condition. Parents sometimes tease their children for being "bookworms", but they don't fret about their mental health. Yet when teens spend hours surfing the web, jumping from website to website, this often prompts concern. Parents lament their own busy schedules and lack of free time but dismiss similar sentiments from their children.

The internet can be a place of unhealthy interactions. Gossip can take on a life of its own. A rumour shared online has the potential to spread farther and faster and persist longer than any school rumour might have in the past. This does not mean that the internet creates gossip, though the most-shared content is often the most embarrassing or humiliating, grotesque or sexual, mean-spirited or shocking. In 2011, 13-year-old California-based Rebecca Black wanted to make a music video. Her mother paid a vanity music label and production company to work with her daughter and her daughter's friends to record a highly Auto-Tuned song called Friday. The associated video appeared on YouTube and quickly generated attention, mostly by people who harshly criticized what they saw as poor songwriting and Black's inability to sing. On Twitter, a comedian described the song as the "worst video ever made". As word spread, Black became a target of cruelty from strangers, classmates and the media. She was attacked online and at school, but gained tremendous positive attention, too. The popular musical TV show Glee decided to do a rendition of her song, and Katy Perry paid homage in Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.) by performing alongside Black in the music video. Black loved the recognition and validation, but she wasn't prepared for the cruelty that came with it.

Some people believe that cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon. Others argue that technology simply offers a new site for bullying, just as the phone did before the internet. Social media has not radically altered the dynamics of bullying, but it has made offensive and hurtful

comments more visible to more people. We must use this visibility, not to justify increased punishment, but to help young people who are actually crying out for attention.

The internet is also a place where people share their pain. In light of highly publicized – but often inaccurately portrayed – cases of teen suicide, seemingly driven by peer cruelty and "dangerous" social media (Tumblrs containing self-harm images, forums where people with anorexia share "tips"), combating cyberbullying and curtailing what teens should be able to do online has become an obsession. Recent tragedies, such as the death of Tallulah Wilson, who took her own life in 2012 after a battle with severe clinical depression and who posted self-harm images on Tumblr, and Hannah Smith, the 14-year-old who killed herself last year after apparently being bullied on ask.fm, demonstrate that the dark side of social network sites is not always straightforward. (Ask.fm have alleged that Smith posted abusive messages to herself; an inquest will take place in May. At a pre-inquest hearing, the coroner said she did not have evidence that the abusive messages were sent by trolls.) But it is naive to assume that conflict and tragedy will disappear if young people use technology less.

There is little doubt that socializing online is rewiring teens' brains, to allow them to understand a deeply networked and intertwined world. Yet I do not think the sky is falling. Teenagers may not yet be experts on navigating a world drowning in information and flush with opportunities for social interaction, but there is no reason to believe that they won't develop those skills. There's also no reason to think that digital celibacy will help them be healthier, happier and more capable adults.

Far from being a distraction, social media is providing a vehicle for teens to take ownership of their lives. Technology makes visible the struggles young people face, but it neither creates nor prevents harmful things happening. It simply mirrors and magnifies many aspects of everyday life, good and bad.

And it can take up a great deal of time. To many adults, these activities can look worthless, but learning takes place whenever and however young people connect. Teens need adults to be present in their lives, but not hovering over every keystroke. They need their own spaces to explore, but they also need a safety net. In other words, they need to know that when they're in trouble, someone will be willing to listen and be respectful and compassionate rather than panicked. In a world where parenting is often reduced to black-and-white directives, nuance is hard to stomach. And yet, if we want to help youth come of age in a networked world, we need to force ourselves to step back and listen.

- This is an edited extract from *It's Complicated: The Social Lives Of Networked Teens* by Danah Boyd, published by Yale University Press at £17.99. To buy a copy for £14.39, go to guardianbookshop.co.uk.

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