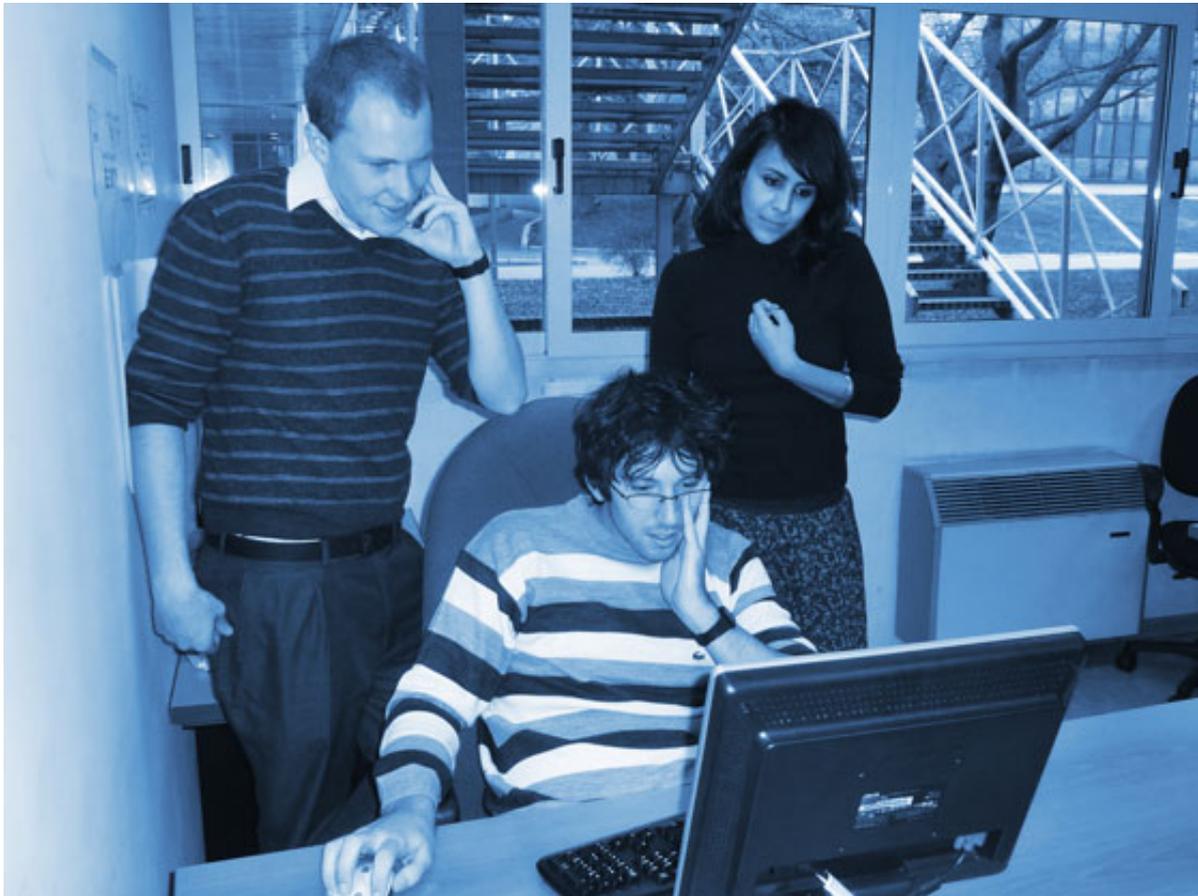# CONNECTED GENERATION

Young People and Social Networks: Outline

The Social Networking Phenomena

According to boyd and Ellison's definitive 2007 article,(1) the first online social network service (SNS) emerged in 1997, but it is only in the last five years that social networks have made it from obscurity to become a ubiquitous part of many people's online, and offline, day to day experience. With 2 billion people predicted to be connected to the Internet by the end of 2010,(2) Facebook now has over 500 million registered users from right across the globe.(3) 2.1 million new Twitter accounts are registered every week,(4) and regional, local and niche social network services and social media sites are being launched and are growing daily.

Whilst a few years ago, clear distinctions could be drawn between the social media sites focused on hosting user-generated content, such as YouTube or the photo-sharing website Flickr - and the social networks which focused on allowing individuals to create personal profiles and to link those profiles to their friends - now the distinctions are blurring. Social networking features are built into, or added onto, most social media websites (and even, increasingly, corporate intranet platforms), and the social networks have become major media-sharing platforms in their own right. Facebook is now the largest photo-sharing website on the planet, hosting over 10 billion photos.(5)

Never before in human history have so many people had the ability to publish content to a potentially global audience: bypassing the need to get permission to publish or to have access to expensive broadcast

equipment. Social media and social networking sites have created new public squares: places where people can meet with friends; do business; gather in crowds or visit alone; find out local gossip, or talk about national issues; share their creativity and find arts and entertainment; and listen to or engage in political expression.

An equal world?

In common with most technologies, access to online social networks is not equally distributed. We looked at some of the differences in access to social network services in the Future Connect report on the potential of social network services for HIV/AIDs communication (http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org/publications/future-connect?articleid=35). Inequalities in access to the Internet mean that many people have no access to social network sites. However, once some means of Internet access is available, social networks are proving to be part of a shared global online experience. In fact, for many, social networks are the reason to get online, and are the hub of their online experience.

Social networks are also not just PC keyboard & screen based services. Most operate mobile websites and offer mobile applications, and many are mobile-only. Some social network services have established special deals with mobile phone networks, providing free access to their networks from phone handsets. In Thailand, the Hi5 social network was the second most visited mobile site in 2009, closely followed by Facebook.(6) Taking the social network mobile can have interesting implications: from allowing people to share photos, media and updates right away when they are out-and-about, to enabling location-based-services that use the global positioning system (GPS) to show people which of their friends have recently 'checked-in' nearby, or customizing the content an individual will see on the network based on their current location.

The exact form that social networking services take in different parts of the world, and the emphasis they place on different aspects of their service, from accessing professionally produced entertainment content to connecting with friends and sharing user-generated content, varies. In Japan, the cell-phone based network Mixi is only available to users with a Japanese cell-phone number. Mixit in South Africa, also cell-phone based, started out with a focus on instant messaging between users on a friends list, and owes much of its success to providing young people with a way to 'text' each other far cheaper than using their mobile phone providers Short-Message-Service (SMS) feature. A lot of the content and communication on major Indian social networks is centered around media content from music and Bollywood stars.

The differences between social network services is often based on differences in Internet access, on cultural norms, and often, which company made it into the social networking market in a country first. Unsurprisingly people join the networks where their friends and contacts are. Some networks play a particular role in connecting diaspora communities. For example, Hi5 and Orkut are not mainstream social networks for young people in the UK (where Facebook now predominates), but young people with family connections to Asia may be members of Hi5 as well as Facebook, and those with particular Latin American or Indian connections may also have an account on Orkut.

Young people in the networked world

Social networking is often seen as a youth phenomenon. Whilst the assumption that the majority of people registered on social network sites are young people is frequently mistaken (less than 50% of Facebook users are under 25; and the average user of Twitter is certainly over 25), social networks can play a very significant role within young people's lives, and young people are often heavy users of these sites.

Young people use social network sites in many different ways:

- Keeping in touch with friends - the vast majority of SNS activity involves just hanging out online with existing friends. Larsen describes the 'love (friendship) discourse' created by leaving messages on friend's profile walls(7), or by clicking the 'like' button to indicate having read and enjoyed someone's postings. These small social cues extend the offline interaction of adolescents and young adults - acting as a way of saying "Hi, I am still your friend and I still care about you."

- Accessing media, entertainment and information - exploring media shared by friends, or searching on the SNS platforms for content of interest.

- Exploring self-identity - crafting an SNS profile, with biographical information, shared media and messages, provides a way for young people to explore their own identity and self-presentation (anyone who has ever written a CV, or submitted a biography for a conference programme will be familiar with the same process of thinking about how you want to be perceived and thinking critically about self-presentation through text, layout, images etc.). Through social network sites young people are 'writing themselves into being' (boyd) online.

- Sharing status updates & media - most networks provide a way for users to share updates on what they have been doing recently, or what they are thinking. These updates are shared with their friends on the network, and can generally become subjects for comments and discussion. Sharing these updates, or sharing media (photos of recent activities; video clips; favorite music, etc.), provides a means for being present to friends and for self-expression.

- Making new connections & engaging with groups - many users of SNS will find they make new connections through them - whether adding a 'friend of a friend' as a new connection to their profile, or finding entirely new people to connect and converse with. Large scale SNS and social media sites, and niche-interest networks and sites also provide interest-specific groups which young users may join to explore a particular interest, or just to 'mess about' and find things that might be interesting.

- Hanging out, messing around, geeking out - the MacArthur funded Digital Youth project, that explored young people's use of digital media in the United States, identified three 'genres' of engagement with digital media: from the hanging out activities noted above, to messing around exploring potential new interests, and to 'geeking out' - using the opportunities of digital media to gain expertise and become deeply engaged in an issue - from making music, to running a business, to getting involved in political movements. Young people are not the only ones engaging in these activities through SNS, but perhaps the biggest generational divide is that many young people have never known life without them. None of us have been on Facebook for more than five years - but for some young people, that five years is the entirety of their adolescent life.

Opportunities and risks: Myths and realities

The challenge in thinking about the impacts of social networks is to cut through reactions based on unfamiliarity or fear, to identify the risks and opportunities they create and, equally as important, the changes that new technologies make to the background conditions of what constitutes a viable policy response to any concerns that they do give rise to.

So what of the different concerns. Are these myths or reality?

- Young people are wasting time on social networks. Many young people can certainly end up spending a lot of time on social networks, though often this is multi-tasking time, doing other things as well as being online or linked to a network by phone. Some young people do identify that they want to spend less time in front of Facebook, or on a particular network. Howard Rheingold has written of the importance of helping young people develop 'attention literacy' to know when to tune out from the flow of conversation in online networks and to focus on other tasks.(8) The Digital Youth report noted that time spent with digital media can be effective informal learning time, and many young people will explain that they were using SNS to get help from friends with projects or homework or even using networks to help them find employment.

- Young people don't believe in privacy and are over-sharing. The 10 billion photos and thousands of status updates every minute on sites like Facebook show that SNS users share a lot of content about themselves online. Some have argued that this leads to the end of privacy. Whilst most SNS offer some privacy features, users may leave their content open to anyone to view, and it can appear as if they do not care about privacy at all. danah boyd describes how much of this arises from individuals having an 'imagined audience' who they think are reading/engaging with their content(9) - when the real audience may be quite different. However,

danah also describes how many young people adopt sophisticated strategies to manage their privacy. There are both risks and benefits to new forms of SNS-enabled online transparency: risks of identity theft or of state surveillance of individuals are, for many, set against benefits of sharing in online communities, or being visible in ways that can bring better job prospects or other opportunities. Privacy isn't dead; but it is constantly evolving.(10)

- Social networks expose young people to dangerous ideas or groups. Undoubtedly the ability for anyone to publish content through social media spaces means there is a lot of negative and potentially harmful content available - and some young people do come across and engage with this content online. Gangs may use social networks to organise, and the way in which most networks only moderate or check content when it is reported to them as problematic means that a lot of harmful content can exist openly relatively undetected by authorities. But just because content is on YouTube or posted somewhere on Facebook, does not mean it is right in front of everyone - most young people never voyage far on a social network from the spaces where their friends are - but some undoubtedly may end up in more harmful 'dark alleyways' of the networks.

- Young people are at risk from sexual predators and abusive adults through SNS. There have been high-profile stories in a number of countries about cases of sexual abuse of young people facilitated by contact on social network sites. In sidelining adult gatekeepers, social networks can facilitate contact between young people and abusive adults - although the absolute number of cases of Internet-mediated harm is small in comparison to the number of young people abused by adults known to them from their family or local community. Research from the Crimes Against Children Research Centre in the United States(11) suggests that those vulnerable to online abuse are often the young people with existing vulnerabilities offline too.

One simple way of understanding SNS is as 'amplifiers'. They can amplify the opportunities available to young people with existing positive connections and opportunities; but they can also amplify the vulnerabilities of the vulnerable. Offering vulnerable and disadvantaged young people support to develop the skills to get the most out of online social networking may turn out to be an important role for those who work with them. Returning to the earlier metaphor of SNS as new public squares (or, to extend the metaphor, whole towns with public and private spaces), they do present some particular policy challenges. Most social networks services are privately owned by companies with commercial goals for the networks - they are 'privatized public space'. They are also global spaces, making it difficult for national norms of regulations to be applied to them. That is why innovations in governance remain a pressing issue, and a topic that has been discussed at The Internet Governance Forum over recent years, including by the Youth Coalition on Internet Governance.

So what?

Social networks are not going to go away, though they will keep evolving. For organizations working with young people, there are several elements to responding to the growth of SNS:

1. Awareness - think about how SNS affect the environment you are working in; make sure you are supporting young people to navigate online risks and take up online opportunities.
2. Use - explore how SNS and social media could provide tools for your work. How could you use the networking opportunities to increase your impact or promote your projects?
3. Outreach - explore how you can spend time working directly in online SNS spaces - either to reach out to young people, or to take a community development approach to addressing some of the risks and problematic spaces.

Fortunately, in the online world you don't have to work out your response alone: a quick search online, or a search on networks like Twitter should find you many colleagues going on the same learning journey.

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assist organisations, individuals and projects in understanding and making the most of new technology. Tim has a BA in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from Oriel College, Oxford, and a MSc in The Social Science of the Internet from the Oxford Internet Institute. He is convenor of the Youth Work Online network, and in early 2011 will be co-ordinating a month of action focussed on equipping the youth sector to work effectively in the digital age.

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4   TechCrunch, http://techcrunch.com/2010/04/14/twitter-has-105779710-registered-users-adding-300k-a-day/, (Accessed 10th Nov 2010)

5   Facebook Engineering Blog, http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=30695603919 (Accessed 10th Nov 2010)

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8   See http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/rheingold/detail?entry_id=38828

9   http://www.danah.org/papers/WhyYouthHeart.pdf, (Accessed Nov 10th 2010)

10 See http://docs.law.gwu.edu/facweb/dsolove/Understanding-Privacy/ for more on privacy in the digital era.

11 http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/