

Chapter 7

Deconstructing the Social Network: Balancing Young People's Rights and Vulnerabilities Within the Online Omopticon

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines the results of an original pilot which investigated young British people's usage and opinions of social networking. The underpinning literature outlines psychological and neurological evidence that suggests young people's personalities are both fledgling and fragile, and that consequently, the online environment may be an inappropriate environment in which to engage in social processes that input to identity development due to the persistence, visibility, and spreadability of information that users commit to their profiles. The data gathered largely supported this thesis and additionally indicated that there may be a gender difference in orientation to online activity in early adolescence.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, children's lives in rich western nations have changed in many ways. This chapter will focus on one of the most profound changes, the advent of social networking- websites designed to facilitate ongoing online 'conversations'- and consequent impacts upon the socialisation of young people between twelve and eighteen. The issues that arise from social networking for children and for adults are inevitably similar, but it is proposed that the effects upon children are more profound, due to developmental vulnerability. It should be noted that the First iPhone was released in 2006, the same year as Facebook became generally available to anyone over thirteen. It took some time for both of these innovations to become 'mainstream' in the western cultural milieu, hence those who fully inhabited a

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2578-3.ch007

socially-networked culture during adolescence are now only just moving into adulthood; as such the effects of a socially networked adolescence will not be fully revealed for some years to come.

The United Nations are already discussing ‘the right of all individuals to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds through the Internet’ (United Nations 2011: online) and have come to the tentative conclusion that complete restriction would be a transgression against article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976), the right to freedom of expression. With respect to the UK, Wagner (2012: online) comments ‘the current position of UK courts rightly makes it very difficult indeed for the state to ban completely a citizen’s use of the internet, however, strong the justification’. Where this level of conversation currently exists relating to adult rights to engage in the online environment, it is likely that related debates about children and young people, focusing on their similarities and differences to adults will inevitably follow, although what the schedule and content of such a debate might be is as yet uncertain. For example, while tobacco smoking gradually became widespread in the UK between the 17th and 18th century, legislation banning its use by children and young people due to its harmful and addictive properties was not enacted until 1908 (ASH 2016: online).

Additionally, there is no general agreement as yet that social networking *is* harmful or addictive.

Whether social networking addiction exists is debatable depending upon the definition of addiction used, but there is clearly emerging evidence that a minority of social network users experience addiction-like symptoms as a consequence of their excessive use. Griffiths (2013, online)

What is clear is that social networking was designed to be used by adults, but has been taken up enthusiastically by young people whose social development processes are still ongoing. As such, the likelihood is that social networking activities are ‘reshaping youthful practices of communication, identity and relationship management’ (Livingston et al 2013:303).

Attitudes towards social networking vary between researchers of the phenomenon, particularly those who focus on young people. Turkel (2011:295) views the issues raised by networked lives as inevitably problematic: ‘we have invented inspiring and enhancing technologies, and yet we have allowed them to diminish us’. Boyd (2014:11) takes a more neutral position, that social networking offers ‘new opportunities and challenges’ which are not inherently problematic, while Harris (2014:214) takes a more philosophical approach: ‘the revolution is complete and the next one is coming. The question is: how do we make human these new worlds?’

This chapter will consider a research project in which young people discussed their engagement with social networking, and their reflections upon the part that it plays in their day-to-day lives.

BACKGROUND

As reflected in the phenomenon in which research is in its very early stages, researchers’ orientations vary. Boyd (2014) takes the position that on the whole, social networking creates new opportunities for young people alongside some underlying challenges. She proposes that young people’s enthusiastic uptake of social media has been generated by a society in which they have constricted opportunities to connect with each other in the physical world, due to heightened parental concern relating to environmental danger and consequent adult direction of children and young people’s leisure time, leaving little time for reflection, socialisation and relaxation. She reports that many of her research participants commented

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