

***Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out:
Kids Living and Learning with New Media***
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Seven things you should know about the internet:

Youth & Social Media

The goal is interaction, whether via the internet or phones or other devices. Teens want to “hang out together” and do so virtually when they are physically separate.

Social Network Sites

Whether it’s Facebook or MySpace or another site, all share 3 properties:

1. *Profile* – a form of self-expression, like getting dressed for the day. Intended to amuse friends, who are sensitive to the “inaccuracies.”
2. *Wall/Comment Space* – Conversations occur that “say nothing” but are a way of keeping in touch and fostering relationships, like adult “small talk.”
3. *Status Updates* – Helps users be co-present with others, even when they can’t be physically present.

Teen Engagement

Teens are much more isolated from each other than older generations. Not allowed to roam freely outside, may live far from friends, overscheduled so it’s hard to get together, etc. Both texting and internet help them engage with others. Further, many teens don’t feel they have any privacy at home, and technology permits them to create a private space where they are in control. Having control is key to the feeling of privacy.

Networked Publics – How online public life differs from offline public life

1. **Persistence** – online stays around forever. Can’t be deleted.
2. **Replicability** – content can be copied and pasted and taken out of context easily.
3. **Searchability** – the potential visibility in networked publics is much greater than in offline life.
4. **Scalability** – what “spreads like wildfire” is usually what we’d least like others to see. Embarrassing moments are magnified exponentially.
5. **Invisible audiences** – no feedback on who’s watching, no social cues that you’d have in face-to-face communication, so it’s harder to do “impression management” online. Learning to deal with invisible audience is an important skill to learn, akin to what old fashioned print journalists needed to master.
6. **Collapsed Contexts** – Because anyone can “tune in” anytime, it’s difficult to maintain distinct social contexts. While we may have one persona at work and another with our friends, it’s hard to maintain this separation in the online world. Blurring is akin to what happens at office parties with alcohol.
7. **Public & Private are Blurred** – Whereas you can whisper a private conversation to someone in a public space, like a park, you can’t have the same private interaction online. It’s all public.

Stratification

The internet is stratified along race and class divisions, just like neighborhoods are. MySpace started as a way to share music, and had a counter-culture vibe. Facebook started at Harvard initially restricted to Ivy League members. It only opened up to the public in 2006. Higher “castes” have moved from MySpace to Facebook, just like white flight caused some people to move to the suburbs. *No “space” is safe or unsafe. It’s the behavior of the people in a space that’s safe/unsafe.*

Fear and Risk

1. **Sexual solicitation** is usually thought of as an old, bald guy pursuing teens. But when it happens, the crime is more akin to statutory rape than to abduction. Often the teen “victim” wants sex, lies about his/her age, and initiates the interaction. Kids are desperate for attention (especially if in an abusive situation or ignored by workaholic parents) and typically engage in many risky behaviors offline before they do so online.
2. **Bullying** is really not that different online from offline. This is not a clear “victim and perpetrator” crime; it needs an audience, too. It is cyclical and roles may reverse, as one victim becomes a bully to a different victim. This is another attention seeking behavior. Sadly, it is often learned from parents. This is a *community* problem not an *online* problem. Technology doesn’t change it; it only makes it more visible.
3. **Pornography** poses little “accidental” danger. It is usually sought by kids (much like sneaking a Playboy magazine) rather than stumbled upon accidentally. Kids are actually exposed to more pornographic images on TV than online.
4. **Youth-Generated Inappropriate Content** is much more problematic than traditional porn. Production, possession and distribution of child pornography are all felonies with devastating consequences, including being labeled a “registered sex offender” for 25+ years. Talk about this with your kids before it happens. If you receive it, delete it immediately. If it’s on a phone, the carrier has a copy and is required to report it. Similarly, pro-anorexia, pro-bulimia or pro-cutting sites are more common in wealthy communities. However, kids prone to this behavior can often be identified by offline behavior before they engage in risky online behavior, so there is great potential for successful interventions.

Open lines of communication

Think of yourself as a member of a community and responsible for the wellbeing of the others in your community. Be the “trusted adult” your kids’ friends can turn to. Keep an eye out for parents as well as kids who need help. Embrace the technology and recognize that it is simply another form of public life we need to manage.

A final note about **COPPA, the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act**. This law was intended to prevent *marketing* to kids. It has nothing to do with online “*safety*.” It requires parental permission before a site can market to kids under 13. Because parental permission is cumbersome, many sites set age limits designed to get around this. This merely encourages users to lie about their ages. You may think your under-age child is ready for his/her own email account or IM account or whatever. But be cognizant of the example you set if you “give them permission to lie.” This is a good conversation to have with your kids.