Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III

Talking to Youth and Parents about Life Online
Executive Summary

This report sets out the findings of an exploratory qualitative research study that examined the attitudes and experiences of children, youth and parents relating to networked communications technologies. Using a semi-structured interview guide, we conducted a total of 12 qualitative group sessions in Calgary, Toronto and Ottawa, with young people ages 11-17 and with parents of children and youth ages 11-17. A total of 66 young people and 21 parents participated in this research.

▸ Parenting in a Networked World

The parents we spoke with were beleaguered by fear of danger and exhausted from the burden of constant vigilance. Although the exact nature of that danger is poorly defined, many parents told us that surveillance is now equated with good parenting, and that the days of trusting their children and providing them with space to explore the world and make mistakes are long gone.

Many talked about spying on their children, both directly and through surveillance intermediaries. There were a handful of parents, however, who trusted their children and felt that this kind of invasive parenting was harmful. Even the parents who advocated spying on their kids were ambivalent about it and worried about the effect it would have on their relationships with their children. But in spite of their discomfort, they argued that they had no choice, especially because they could not rely on the school system or online corporations to help protect their children.

From our participants' perspective, schools were particularly problematic. They felt that schools were often requiring their children to use the Internet for assignments and homework, but were not necessarily doing enough to prepare them to deal with the pitfalls. The corporations that own the sites

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their children visit were also seen as untrustworthy because they were encouraging kids to disclose "everything" in order to make a profit.

▶ Life in the Fish Bowl – the Children's View

The young people we spoke with told us that, from their perspective, the Internet is now a fully monitored space where parents, teachers and corporations keep them under constant surveillance.

Monitoring at Home

Many of our participants told us that parental monitoring is the price of admission; unless they give their parents their online passwords and "friend" them on Facebook, they are not allowed to use networked devices.

Our 11-12-year-old participants accepted this kind of monitoring as a necessary precaution. From their perspective, the Internet is a very dangerous place. They told us that sharing any information put them at risk of being kidnapped, assaulted by a stranger, and stalked. The 11-12-year-olds also appreciated parental rules because they did not want to come across offensive content. They demonstrated strong resilience when it came to dealing with both offensive content and unwanted conversations with strangers. They clicked out of offensive sites, knew not to talk to strangers, used moderating tools, and were very careful about divulging any personal information. However, they had also learned that these precautions were necessary because people were not trustworthy.

The teens we talked to also demonstrated strong resilience about dealing with "creeps", and almost universally limited their online interactions to people to whom they were connected in the real world. From their perspective, constant parental monitoring was accordingly unnecessary and rooted in paranoia. Monitoring was particularly annoying when younger relatives "snitched" on them and most used privacy settings and other methods to block nosy family members from their online lives. However, their privacy was particularly difficult to maintain because many of their parents felt that they had the right to snoop through their Facebook accounts or read their text messages.

The teenagers who did share the details of their lives with their parents were the ones who were not routinely monitored. Trust in this case was mutual; the parents trusted their children to behave appropriately and the children responded by providing them with access to their Facebook page. This suggests that there may be an inverse relationship between surveillance and trust, and that monitoring alone may work against open family dialogue.

However, in spite of their frustration with parental monitoring, almost all our participants felt their parents were acting out of good intentions. And, even though parents were perceived to be annoying, distrustful and naïve, our participants all agreed that if they did run into trouble online, their parents were the ones who would help them navigate the pitfalls. Typically, they tried to handle problems on

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their own first, but they knew that their parents had their backs, and were available on call to come in and set limits when they were needed.

Monitoring at School

For our participants, monitoring at school was a given; they all told us that everything they did online was tracked. However, school monitoring was so extensive that it frequently blocked them from accessing educational materials.

But the real problem with monitoring, from our participants' point of view, was the school's desire to police their interactions with their peers in order to ensure that they did not "swear" or write something "inappropriate". Rather than giving them the opportunity to communicate and then correcting them when they went off course, schools created an environment where any communication between them was perceived as risky. This kind of micromanagement frustrated our participants, particularly in the context of anti-bullying programs.

From their perspective, cyberbullying was easier to deal with than offline meanness, because online communications leave a digital trail. The visibility of online dialogue also let them challenge bullies publicly and hold them to account. They also demonstrated a strong resiliency when it came to cyberbullying. They had very clear strategies: first, ignore it and de-friend or block the person (typically a very successful strategy); if it continues then confront the bully face-to-face because it is easier to call someone to account in person; and if that does not work or you are not comfortable talking to the person directly, call in your parents and they will help you resolve the conflict.

However, almost all of our participants were disdainful of school anti-bullying programs; they felt that, in general, teachers and principals did not understand the kinds of problems they might face and only made things worse when they intervened. Anti-bullying programs also pathologized a great deal of their everyday behaviour, and that many of their day-to-day communications were redefined as bullying by school authorities.

Monitoring in the Marketplace

Although our participants still tended to congregate on corporate sites like Facebook and YouTube, they did not see online corporations as friendly or trustworthy. Instead, they told us online companies were trying to "fool" them and "trick" them into releasing information. Their attitudes towards online advertising ranged from ambivalent to distrustful. A number of them expressed discomfort with companies that might "twist their words" or co-opt their pictures for marketing purposes, and the older teens expressed their annoyance with spam. Some tried to read privacy policies and terms of use agreements but they generally agreed that this did not help because corporations purposely hid what they were doing with their information.

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▸ What Young People Get Out of Networked Technologies

The pervasive monitoring that our participants experienced online was problematic for them, because many of them use online technologies to explore the world, learn new things, try on new identities and connect with friends. Surveillance shut down online spaces for these uses, especially identity play and connecting with friends, because the lack of privacy made it more difficult to achieve anonymity or intimacy.

Tweens

Our 11-12-year-old participants used networked devices to meet their developmental needs to explore their own interests and to learn more about the adult world and the types of social roles available to them. The Internet was particularly useful when they wanted to learn more about things they would encounter in the future, like places they were going to visit on family vacations, high school and jobs that interested them. This kind of exploration provided them with a safe way to "rehearse" things and become more comfortable with teenage and adult roles.

The Internet also made it easier for them to learn about current events that first came to their attention offline and to follow celebrities. They demonstrated a strong critical understanding of many of the popular culture images they encountered and often made decisions about the kinds of content they did not want to see because it made them uncomfortable.

Monitoring was also less problematic because they tended to have less interest in online communication. Although they did use networked technologies to keep in touch with family and find out what friends were doing and saying, social networking sites tended to bore them and were relegated to places older teens go.

This age group particularly enjoyed "pranks" or "trolls", where someone would fool you and misdirect you to the wrong site on purpose or make a silly phone call. Pranks were also useful, because they helped them learn how not to be fooled.

Early Teens

Our 13-14-year-old participants also enjoyed online humour, and sites that allowed them to post anecdotes and read silly things that other people had done. They enjoyed laughing at and laughing with others who did things that were foolish or silly, and found comfort in the fact they were not the only ones who were likely to do something "stupid". They also liked to connect with others through humour and some published stories and drawings on literature and artwork sites as a form of self-expression.

The early teens expressed annoyance with pranks, although they also laughed about them and some admitted they continue to "troll" friends for fun. Accordingly, pranking continued to be one of the ways

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they played with each other, but it also allowed them to demonstrate their superior knowledge of the way things work online.

Some of our 13-14-year-old participants signed online petitions, most of which were focused on animal cruelty, but the main uses of networked technologies were for connecting with friends and self-expression.

Not many of our participants talked about identity play. Some talked about pretending to be someone else on a chat site, but few wanted to do this because chat rooms were universally seen as dangerous. Those that did participate in identity play told us that the sense of danger was part of the appeal. Like pranking, it provided them with an opportunity to explore the adult world and poke fun at it in a relatively safe way. However, even those participants who did go on chat sites were reluctant to talk to strangers because they were worried that they themselves would be identified and disciplined for it.

Online technologies were also a way to express oneself, especially for shy teens. The participants told us that social networking and texting were important ways to communicate their feelings, so they could better understand themselves and their social interactions. However, this was problematized by the fact that they knew adults were monitoring them. Accordingly, the lack of online privacy made it difficult for them to express themselves for fear of reprisal.

Older Teens

Our 15-17-year-old participants relied on online technologies to talk to friends, organize events and gatherings, follow celebrity gossip, and access YouTube videos to learn how to do things like dance. They were no longer interested in online pranks and universally identified "trolling" as the worst thing about being online. Like the younger teens, this group used the Net to learn more about current events that interested them. Some also used newspaper sites as a way of connecting with home when they were out of town.

Some participants also expressed concerns that this easy access to the outside world was making them lazy.

Older teens still relied on social networking to keep in touch with their peers, but the background monitoring to which they were subjected constrained their communications with each other and discouraged them from posting certain kinds of content. Instead, many turned to anonymous blogging where they were freer to express their feelings. Anonymous online self-expression therefore played an important role in helping older teens make sense of the social world and their place in it.

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▶ The Rules of Online Friendships

Since online self-presentation was so important to all our participants, they had a clearly defined set of rules about what friends post – and do not post – about friends. Personal attacks were generally forbidden and a sign that a friendship was at an end. However, personal attacks were also an opportunity for your friends to stand up for you.

Pictures were highly regulated by all of our participants. Some of them routinely untagged every picture of them posted on Facebook, so they could keep control of their images. Others monitored their friends' pages to make sure they were being represented fairly.

It was generally agreed that friends never post embarrassing pictures of friends. If someone in their circle of friends posted a picture they did not like, they would contact them and ask them to take it down. If the picture was not removed, they would try to access the source (i.e. the friend's cell phone, camera or Facebook page) through whatever means and remove it themselves.

Friends could be trusted not to expose each other to ridicule. Friends therefore kept silly and embarrassing pictures of each other on their phones because phones were considered to be private; or they deleted them after the joke was over.

There were also specific rules about exposure that determined how close friends were. For example, an unrealistic number of online "friends" was seen as inauthentic and a sign of desperation. Similarly, "spam statuses" were an indicator that someone was seeking an inappropriate amount of attention and was therefore not a desirable friend.

Girls who exposed themselves by posting sexualized pictures on Facebook or sexting were the subject of special derision. Girls of all ages accordingly exercised extra caution to avoid being labelled a "slut".

Relationship status also regulated the degree of attention someone was entitled to pay to an online persona. Checking out new people online was a form of stalking that was generally socially acceptable so long as the person did not make any direct contact. Creeping, or paying more attention, was acceptable for "best friends" because they were supposed to know your intimate secrets, but others, like parents, were expected to keep their distance. The fact that information was posted on Facebook did not determine who should or should not look at it; instead, the level of attention was closely regulated by the people's respective positions in a complex web of real world social relationships.

Our participants also told us that online communication made it easier to deal with unwanted attention from people outside their circle of friends. Unwanted contact could be ignored. By not responding,

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participants were able to create and maintain personal and social boundaries without face-to-face embarrassment.

▶ Ethical Use of Online Content and Digital Literacy

All our participants used online technologies to express themselves in some way, and put a great deal of thought into crafting their online personas. As part of that process, they would often co-opt copyrighted material and repurpose it for their own self-presentation. Our participants also routinely reproduced online content, especially images, in their school assignments. Virtually all the young people we talked to were familiar with the issues around plagiarism, and told us that their teachers had strict rules that required them to cite the source and provide clear credit to the creator of the content. These rules structured their views on ethical use of online content both in and out of school.

The younger participants who incorporated music and images into their personal profiles or videos did not see this as a use of someone else's property, and typically did not worry about issues of ownership. When we asked about copyright concerns, they reasoned that the rules were the same as they were for plagiarism in school: it was fine to use the material so long as you cited where you got it. From their perspective, they were complimenting the artist who produced the material.

Our teenaged participants also told us that it was permissible to use song lyrics, videos and stills so long as they cited the source, or the songs were well known enough that people would know where they came from. They were particularly frustrated by the copyright hoops they were required to jump through on YouTube, and felt that they were not doing anything unethical so long as they were not earning any profits from the use.

Downloading music without paying for it was a widespread practice according to all our participants.

Perhaps because of the high level of monitoring networked technologies in general, our participants did not use networked devices to enhance their learning in innovative ways. The school environment was considered to be hostile to iPods and cell phones, and the students' ability to use any networked device (including computers) was highly dependent upon the particular teacher. Some teachers allowed them to use the calculators and agendas on their phones and iPods to help them keep track of assignments; others took advantage of school websites where they could post homework or class notes and remind students of upcoming tests. But, for the most part, our participants primarily used online technologies to access Google and do research.

Some teachers would let them use their phones or iPods or go on Facebook as a reward for completing their work in a timely way. They generally worried that greater access to these devices would be counter-productive because they would be easily distracted by incoming texts and messages from

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friends. At the same time, they continued to text friends under their desk when their teachers were not looking.

On the other hand, students who had trouble concentrating found that listening to music or using the Internet actually helped them concentrate, because it helped them to shut out the distractions in the classroom.

There was little evidence that our participants were using networked devices to collaborate on school assignments. Interestingly, they universally told us their teachers told them not to use Wikipedia because "Anyone can put anything on there."

▸ Unplugging

Although a few of our participants told us that losing access to the online world, even for a week, would be catastrophic, many of them talked about the need to retreat in order to re-establish a sense of privacy. Some told us that losing access to online technologies would not be "a big deal", while others felt that devices were becoming so fully monitored, that they had little choice but to unplug.

▸ Moving Ahead

Combined with our qualitative research from teachers,[1] the insight collected through this qualitative research has raised a number of themes relating to the digital lives of children and youth, and the ways that adults can encourage the greater critical engagement that is at the heart of fostering digitally savvy young Canadians.

Our findings indicate that there is already a solid basis upon which to build. In spite of widespread concerns on the part of adults, the young people we spoke with were aware of online risks, largely self-regulated their own behaviours to avoid and manage those risks, and consistently demonstrated resiliency and competence in their responses to those risks. They actively sought out parental guidance when needed, and indicated a desire to work *with* adults when online conflicts or concerns arose.

We look forward to exploring how best to do that in our national school survey in 2013.

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[1]See *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III -- Teachers' Perspectives* at http://mediasmarts.ca/research-policy

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