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Professional Resource:

The Young & the Digital: What the Migration to Social-Network Sites, Games, and Anytime, Anywhere Media Means for Our Future (2009)

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The Young & the Digital: What the Migration to Social-Network Sites, Games, and Anytime, Anywhere Media Means for Our Future (2009)
By S. Craig Watkins
Beacon Press, Boston, MA

Does the Web make us less social? Do social-networking sites change the kinds of personal bonds and connections that young people make? These are among the primary questions posed by S. Craig Watkins in *The Young & the Digital: What the Migration to Social-Network Sites, Games, and Anytime, Anywhere Media Means for Our Future* (Beacon, 2009).

Watkins, who has spent a decade examining the media usage of young people, contributes to an increasingly crowded area of scholarship on the ways in which young people interact with technology and each other in the digital age.

Much has been written about how teenagers and twenty-somethings have fully embraced social media and become accustomed to constant communication with their friends. They are often described as a generation of information grazers and chronic multitaskers tethered to their smartphones and laptops.These characterizations are scattered throughout academic studies, foundation reports and news articles. Watkins ties it all together in his book, which he describes as an "intimate and evidence-based portrait of a generation we simply call the young and the digital" (xiv).

In coining this phrase, Watkins also contributes to the increasingly crowded list of identifiers for a demographic already known to many as the Millennials, Digital Natives, Net Generation and Generation Facebook. Watkins, who has written extensively about hip-hop culture, regularly interacts with people in this age group as an associate professor in the University of Texas at Austin's departments of radio-television-film and sociology, and the Center for African American Studies.

His book is based on field interviews and surveys of college-aged students, as well as discussions with teachers and parents. In 2006, Watkins took part in the MacArthur Foundation's Media Initiative on Youth, Digital Media and Learning, in which a group of scholars and technology experts from across the world investigated the ways in which young people interact with and learn from social and mobile media. This research took place at a time when Facebook was beginning its meteoric rise and YouTube was becoming a household name.

Watkins begins by tracing the history of media consumption in American households – from the family gatherings around a single living room television to the more fragmented, modern multi-screen setup that includes TVs, computers, cell phones and digital game players. These are the technology-rich environments in which many of those surveyed in Watkins' book came of age.

It's easy to forget – but Watkins reminds us – that this generation is the first to have grown up with ready access to broadband Internet at home. The young and the digital rushed home from school, logged onto their computers, and through instant messaging and later text messaging, interacted with many of the same people they saw in person during the day. They have largely carried these virtual communication routines into young adulthood. Digital, as Watkins explains, has become a way of life.

On the questions of whether the Internet makes young people less social and whether social networking sites contribute to the weakening of offline relationships, Watkins provides emphatic answers: no and no. He

emerges as a staunch defender of teenagers and twenty-somethings who embrace new media technologies.

Engagement with technology is engagement with friends – Watkins argues that young people rarely consider time with their smartphones and laptops to be alone time. Put another way, attachment to these digital devices is a sign of hypersocial rather than antisocial behavior. "Young people simply do not believe that daily participation in the online world, posting a quick message on a friend's Facebook wall, or text messaging represent threats to community," he writes. "In fact, they consistently view these and other new media behaviors as social and communal experiences" (74).

Watkins finds no evidence to support the common complaint that young people are more comfortable in front of a screen than a real person. Rather, he writes, the young and the digital use communication technologies to facilitate face-to-face interactions and complement current relationships, not as a substitute for face time. His survey results confirm this claim: Nearly 85 percent of respondents disagreed with the statement that online relationships can be just as fulfilling as offline ones. They said that social networking is less about making new friends and more about communicating more effectively with established friends and acquaintances.

Watkins' findings that young people don't view social networking sites as "destinations for hanging out" with friends might come as a surprise to parents who wonder what else could be motivating their children's incessant use of computers and cell phones. But Watkins frames this time spent texting, instant messaging and (however old-fashioned it now seems) e-mailing as "life sharing" and "communicating with friends in between the next face-to-face encounter" (65).

Young Web-users rarely communicate with strangers online, and social-networking sites don't appear to be radically changing the kind of personal connections that young people make, Watkins argues. They still maintain strong and weak ties – it's just easier now to manage all types of relationships, most of which develop first offline.

Watkins is strident is his defense of students' social capabilities, writing that they are "not transforming into social recluses or heartless machines" and that they "maintain healthy interest in people around them." As for all that time young people spend playing video games that parents often deride as being antisocial? Don't be so quick to judge, Watkins argues. Multiplayer games such as World of Warcraft and systems such as the Nintendo Wii encourage ample social interaction.

Watkins spends considerable time explaining the phenomenon he refers to as "digital gating" – the maintenance of social and geographic boundaries in the online world. Watkins noticed that the college students – and white students in particular – surveyed overwhelmingly preferred Facebook to MySpace. They complained that MySpace is inhabited largely by uneducated, boorish users, while Facebook is more exclusive and helps facilitate communication among people who are likely to be enrolled in college and live in close physical proximity. The exclusivity argument seems antiquated at a time when Facebook has moved beyond requiring an .edu e-mail address for registration and is now the favored social-networking site of many parents of the initial adopters. But the book's discussion of how the social Web tends to reinforce existing class and racial divisions continues to be pertinent.

Watkins outlines the ways in which young people of lower-income backgrounds are disadvantaged by the so-called digital divide. They are just as enthusiastic as their peers about social media and digital technology as a whole but often lack access to broadband Internet at home and at school. Watkins argues that students in the less-affluent communities also don't receive the same kinds of instruction about navigating the consequences of the social Web. Parents of more-affluent students (and their teachers) are more likely to set guidelines about social media use and explain the potential pitfalls of posting private information online, Watkins writes.

Throughout the book, Watkins sprinkles in statistics from his survey of college students. Among the most telling tidbits are the following:

- Ninety-seven percent of students surveyed have a mobile phone, and the same number said they have a personal profile on a social-networking site.
- Ninety-three percent of people reported having a computer.
- Three-quarters of the students visit a social-networking site at least once a day, and half visit three or more times a day.

Young people prefer the Internet over television – they spend an average of 21 hours online a week compared to 14 hours watching TV. Fifty-six percent of those surveyed said the Internet is a necessity, while only 42 percent said the same about TV.

Many of Watkins' findings, such as that young people often have a difficult time focusing in class because of their habitual multitasking, won't come as much of a surprise to those who have been following trends in youth media consumption over the past several years. Watkins' survey largely mirrors research conducted by groups such as the Pew Internet & American Life Project. Many of his discoveries certainly won't be news to people who are members of the young and the digital demographic.

But for those who don't track reports on digital media use or have seen them only periodically, and for people who are members of a demographic that could accurately be called the old and the analog, Watkins does the important work of aggregating a wide range of revealing data (including his own) about the digital lives of young people. All the while, he makes a persuasive case that in-person relationships aren't being damaged by the turn toward the social Web.