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Professional Resource:

Teens, Social Media and Privacy (2013)

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Teens, Social Media and Privacy, by Mary Madden, Amanda Lenhart, Sandra Cortesi, Urs Gasser, Maeve Duggan, and Aaron Smith. (2013). Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet and American Life Project.

During the summer and early fall of 2012, the Pew Research Center and the Berkman Center for Internet & Society teamed up to survey 802 young people, between the ages of twelve and seventeen, about how they use social media. This 2012 survey follows similar surveys conducted almost annually since 2006. The results were released in May 2013, and although the survey had nothing specifically to do with media and education, the reported findings do reveal some foundational shifts that should concern anyone working with teens. Three in particular stand out:

1. *Teens are moving away from Facebook.*

They are not abandoning it completely (94% of teen social media users have profiles on the networking site, and 81% name Facebook as the social media site they visit most often), but teens are diversifying their social media portfolio through an increased use of Twitter and Instagram. Use of Twitter jumped by more than half from 2011 to 2012, and Instagram, which was not included in the Pew/Berkman survey in 2011, ranked as the third most popular social media site, surpassing even YouTube and Tumblr (Madden et al. 2013). In focus groups, teens called Facebook “drama central” and a place “where people post unnecessary pictures and they say unnecessary things” (Madden et al. 2013, 26). Virtually none of the reported findings from the focus groups included teens gushing over Facebook, yet as one fifteen-year-old female respondent said, “I’m on it [Facebook] constantly but I hate it so much”

(Madden et al 2013, 38).

2. *The scope of information being shared by teens is increasing.* Ninety-one percent of teens on social media post photos of themselves on the account they use most often, whereas in 2006, this figure was 79% (Madden et al. 2013). The report’s authors attribute the shift to the growing pervasiveness of smartphones among teens as well as the central role photo sharing plays in both creating and maintaining a presence on a social media site. More teens are also posting their cell phone numbers (20% in 2012, versus 2% in 2006) and 16% of teens have their profiles set up to include their geographic location whenever they post a status update (Madden et al. 2013). As for privacy, most teens on Facebook (61%) said they checked their privacy settings at least once within the last month, and only 14% keep their profile completely public—suggesting that even as teens are posting more personal information, most are being more mindful about the audience they allow to see that information (Madden et al. 2013).

3. *Third-party access to personal data is not a significant concern for most teens.* Only 9% of all teens on social media said they were “very concerned” about data collection, which could be bad news for the 46% of surveyed parents who were equally concerned about how both advertisers and businesses can access and use data about their teens (Madden et al. 2013, 57, 61).

The findings that teens are branching out from Facebook and using more social media sites have significant ramifications for media literacy educators. Three out of four teen social media users visit sites on a daily basis, and the more Facebook friends a

teen has, the more likely he or she is to also have a Twitter account (Madden et al. 2013). This, together with the qualitative findings from the focus groups, suggests that teens are starting to pay closer attention to the social media platforms used, and recognize the distinct characteristics and limitations of each. As an example, they understand that the limited number of characters allowed on Twitter makes it more suited for brief thoughts and links to other content, and in some ways constrain bullying behavior. They also understand that Instagram is almost purely visual, and is used as an outlet for creative expression as much as it is for sharing with friends. The one-size-fits-all social media platform does not exist—it never has, despite Facebook’s best efforts—and each platform has different characteristics. As indicated by the focus group data, teens recognize these limitations and characteristics, and are drifting to other platforms according to the online social interaction they want to experience.

This level of thoughtfulness is a good thing. It reflects that teens are thinking as much about how they say something, as they are about what they say and to whom they may be saying it. Storytelling—indeed, all communication—depends on these elements, and can be used as a lens for concepts like information, news, and technology literacies. Digital culture may be at a point now where educators can start teaching from the premise that students as young as twelve are conscientious about the tools they and others use to perform different tasks. They are no longer using Facebook simply because it is the only game in town, but instead are choosing platforms that best suit their personalities and communities. In that case, a preferred social media site may even be indicative of how a student is best able to process information and communicate with others.

However, the branching out also poses some complications. It is important for teens (and all users of social media) to understand the basics of how and why a platform works, particularly one you use to store personal data. The study found that 40% of teens are “somewhat” or “very concerned” about third-party access to their data, whereas 81% of parents reported the same level of concern (Madden et al. 2013). This, and statements from the focus groups, suggests that teens tended towards indifference or ignorance on data mining at the time of the study. However, they do care about managing their reputation and privacy settings, and so the hole in their knowledge might have to do with the business side of media. With only 14%

of young people opting for a fully public Facebook profile, the study suggests that most teens understand that at least some of their information should be kept private. Do they also know that private profiles can still be data mined, and indeed, must be mined in order for a company to be profitable?

The way in which a company makes money matters. Facebook, Google, and Twitter may seem free, but they have value because users give them personal information, which is then shared and used to decide what ads to put in front of them. Being marketed to is neither a crime nor a tragic event, but it is not positive for young people—any people—to give up their data and think it comes at no cost to them. If young people understand how their information is used, then they may take a different approach to how they use the networks. The “program or be programmed” mantra (Rushkoff 2010, 13) applies not just to learning how to code, but also to understanding the actions which are triggered when you share a status update, video, photo, or invite friends to join you on Bejeweled Blitz. One also wonders whether the teens expressing their current preference for Instagram as a way to distance themselves from Facebook were aware of Facebook’s April 2012 announcement that it would acquire Instagram for \$1 billion. The deal officially closed in September of the same year (Geron 2012); survey results were collected during that time, between July 26 and September 30, 2012. This relationship is likely to shape the evolution of the Instagram platform.

Of course, talking about the economics behind the media industry is an altogether new task for most media literacy educators. Teaching through the hands-on creation of original media is a far more enjoyable prospect for both teachers and students, but it is time for the discussion to take place within the media literacy community. We spend a lot of time teaching students about how media function—how messages may reinforce stereotypes, the ways in which stories are told, how to edit a video, or why some events are covered in news and others are not. But understanding how the media industry functions is as important as understanding how media content function, and squarely falls within the scope of media literacy education.

References

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