**Chapter Two**

**Looking Closely at Teens' Use of Social Networking: What do High School Seniors Do Online?**

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**INTRODUCTION**

In order to use social networks for the effective delivery of library services and instruction to teens, we first need to understand how teens use these tools in their everyday lives. With this goal in mind, we set out to study how students attending a highly technological high school use social networks and other information and communication technologies (ICT's) for personal communication purposes. This chapter will describe the study and the results, and it will explain what the results indicate for the successful delivery of public and school library services to teens.

**DESCRIBING THE STUDY**

We chose to use focus group interviews to conduct this study. A focus group is an interview in which one or two moderators question a group of people at the same time. Typically there are about six to ten participants in each focus group session. The moderators usually run a series of focus groups, stopping when no new information is coming to light. The moderators work from a predetermined interview guide (a list of questions) with each group, and they are careful to give each focus group participant the

chance to answer each of the questions in the focus group guide. The goal of the focus group technique is to determine people's thoughts and opinions on issues of interest, such as opinions on a new product or reactions to a newly proposed law, making it a good choice for investigating student attitudes about social networks.

## THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

We held a series of six focus group interviews with a total of 45 students in the senior class of the selected high school. There were 34 boys and 11 girls in the six interview sessions (see **Table 1** for details).

[Insert **Table 2.1** approximately here.]

In a qualitative study such as this one, it's important to understand the context of the research and the perspectives of the research participants. The high school where this study took place is located on the outskirts of a large Eastern U.S. city. It serves a primarily white, middle- to upper-middle-class population. As of September 2009, there were 775 students enrolled in grades eight through twelve. Slightly over 90% of its 2009 graduates went on to some form of higher education. For the academic year 2009-2010, there were 162 students in the senior class.

The school district places high importance on educational delivery via digital technologies. Within the district there are interactive whiteboards in every classroom in grades 5-12, and digital projection in all K-12 classrooms. In addition to traditional computer labs in each school and in each school library, there are 18 mobile computer

labs in the high school, six in the middle school, and four in the elementary schools. Beginning in the 2010-2011 school year, completion of a computer science course will be a high school graduation requirement for all incoming ninth grade students.  The school is also a Classrooms for the Future (http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/classrooms_for_the_future/475 ) recipient, a program which equips high school English, math, science, and social studies classrooms in participating schools with enhanced technology and provides Internet-connected laptop computers for every teacher and every student.

All this is to say that these teens came from mostly middle-class, white backgrounds, and that they had received considerable technology exposure and instruction in school.  As a result, it is likely that they were more active users of social networks and other technologies than the average U.S. teenager.  This makes them ideal targets for providing library services via social networks.  We can also look to them as teen technology leaders and study their thoughts and behaviors as a basis for thinking about the future of electronic library services to teens.

The focus group sessions were conducted in a private meeting room inside the high school.  For each session, there was one moderator and one note-taker present, and the sessions were audio-taped.  Each session lasted approximately one to one and a half hours.  The focus group guide included questions related to the students' preferred technologies for communicating with friends and family and why they preferred those technologies; the reasons why they did or did not engage in online social networking; how the students selected tools for social networking and other communication purposes; and how they decided whom to accept as online "friends."

After the focus group interviews were over, we analyzed the data using standard content analysis methods for qualitative data. The results of the data analysis are presented and explained in the next sections of this chapter.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT TEENS AND THEIR USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS?

The first thing we learned is that when we're talking about teens, it's impossible to separate social networks from other methods of mediated communication, such as texting and talking via cell phones. These teens thought more in terms of the end goal—communication—than in terms of the specific technologies they would use to reach that goal. Thus, although we had intended to focus only on social network use, we ended up studying teens' use of other ICT's as well, particularly their use of cell phones.

In general, these students tended to view social networks and cell phones from a pragmatic standpoint. They saw them as tools for quick and easy communication and as useful for relationship building and maintenance, more than as high-tech toys or gadgets. The students selected their communication media based on the closeness of the relationship they had with the message receiver(s), and based on the number of intended receivers. Texting via cell phones was the most frequent means of mediated communication, occurring throughout the day at school, home, work, and social events. Most sent frequent text messages—often many times each day—to communicate with a select group of about four to six close friends including boyfriends and girlfriends, and many also texted and called their parents and other relatives, although less frequently.

Interestingly, although nearly all of the students were frequent cell phone users, most voiced hesitation about using traditional landline telephones.  As one of the girls said, "I don't answer the [home] phone anymore."  Much of this reluctance came from privacy concerns and from a general distrust of landline telephones.  The teens agreed that nearly everyone they would want to talk to on the telephone had their cell phone numbers, meaning that landline callers were mostly telemarketers, callers dialing wrong numbers, and other strangers with whom they did not want to interact.

## Teens' Social Networking and ICT Use Patterns

In terms of online social networking, these students tended to use social networks--Facebook in particular--for less frequent contact with a much wider range of friends and sometimes parents, siblings, and other relatives.  Roughly half of the students in the study used social networks daily; slightly fewer used them a few times a week; and three of the students did not use online social networks at all.  Facebook was the social network of choice for nearly all of the students who used social networks.  Just one of the forty-five students was an avid MySpace user.  A few other students indicated that they did not have active MySpace accounts, but that they did use MySpace for listening to music.

Common social network activities included posting photos for distribution and archival purposes; broadcasting information about social gatherings and sports events; gathering information about new friends and casual acquaintances; and making contact with lost friends and physically distant acquaintances.  Librarians interested in using social networks to connect with teens can design services to meet these uses, such as using library social network pages to post pictures from library programs, to advertise

upcoming programs and events, to announce new homework and other course-related resources, and to try to attract new library users.

On the whole, these teens tended to use social technologies differently for communication with adults than with peers.  A minority had friended their parents on Facebook.  Most, however, scoffed at the idea.  As one of the teens explained: "It adds another layer of connectivity that you don't need."  When asked if they would friend a teacher on Facebook, the prevailing opinion was no.  "It's creepy," said one student with a grimace.  It is therefore unlikely that large numbers of teens would want to friend their librarians.  They are more likely to turn to library pages on social networks as informational sources, rather than turning to librarians as online friends for personal or school-related communication purposes.

Although texting and Facebook dominated the teens' communication with friends, they tended to prefer email for interactions with teachers because it's "less personal."  With email, "they can't see your profile."  As a result, librarians should not abandon email contact with teens in favor of social networks, but rather use both contact methods for maximizing the ways in which teens can choose to communicate with their libraries and their librarians.

As a group, these students were heavy users of ICT's.  Many of them echoed the sentiments that "texting is pretty addicting," and that "I use Facebook pretty much all of the time."  One of the boys said that his most recent phone bill indicated he had sent over 1,000 text messages the previous month.  One of the girls in another session said that she had sent over 1,500 text messages the previous month.  Others in these sessions chimed in to say that their use of texting was about as frequent, sending an average of about 30 to

35 text messages per day. These numbers might seem high, but they are consistent with recent teen cell phone use data (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). Regardless of the exact numbers, these students considered themselves to be very frequent users of text messaging and of Facebook, often referring to themselves as "addicted" to technology.

### How do Teens Select Social Networks and Other ICT's?

Just as important as understanding which technologies teens prefer to use for communication and information purposes is understanding *why* they prefer them. Overall, we learned from this study that for teens, there is no one preferred method for mediated communication. Instead, teens select the technologies that they will use to contact people based on a number of contextual factors, most notably the relationship with the intended message recipients and with the number of intended recipients, as discussed above, as well as based on simplicity of use, speed of communication, the ability to maintain constant contact, and multitasking capabilities.

**Simplicity of Use**

Head and Eisenberg (2010) found that one of the main reasons undergraduates choose to use *Wikipedia* for academic research was the simplicity of its interface. For the participants in the current study, the overwhelming social network of choice was Facebook, and the simplicity of its interface was one of its main attractions, both for students who considered themselves to be heavy technology users and for those who were more reluctant users. For example, one of the girls explained that:

Technology is not my thing.  Facebook, they kind of set it up so it's easy to get your way around it.  Like with MySpace, I haven't used it because it is so complicated.  And I don't even know what Twitter is.  But Facebook seems like the easiest to use out of all of them [so I use it].

One of the boys explained why he had switched from using MySpace to using Facebook: "At the start it [MySpace] was okay, but it became really annoying.  The only reason I would be on MySpace would be to communicate with someone, and I would click on their profile, and they would have so much garbage on their site, music playing.  It got to be way too much.  MySpace was not as simple [as Facebook]."  This quote shows how teens tend to view social networks more as communication tools than as entertainment resources.

Of the forty-five students, only three (all boys) lacked active Facebook profiles.  When asked why they did not use Facebook or other social networking utilities, one of the boys replied: "I think if I actually had a Facebook I would be too lazy to go on and check it and write stuff.  If I want to talk to someone, I would rather call them up or text them.  I think it is easier."

When asked why texting was so popular, again simplicity of use was a determining factor.  The heavy texters all agreed that they texted so often because texting is "simple and fast."  On the other hand, those who were less frequent texters found its physical and cognitive requirements to be taxing.  As one of the boys explained: "I am not a fan of texting.  I am not that coordinated.  My phone has small buttons."

The lesson to be learned here is that simplicity is key to providing electronic library services for teens.  Librarians should make sure that their online services are easy

for teens to use, and that their social network pages are not overly cluttered or overwhelming to navigate.

**Speed of Communication**

Related to the idea of simplicity of use was a preference for social networks and other technologies that could be used quickly and that enabled immediate response from the intended message recipients. Students in all six sessions agreed that they were texting much more frequently than in the past, and that texting had largely replaced talking on telephones, both cell phones and landlines. When asked why, there was widespread agreement that texting is a much faster form of communication: "It takes two seconds" to send a text message. Even though text messaging conversations could last over a period of days, each conversation turn was seen as quick and efficient, and therefore the best choice for frequent, brief communication: "Text messaging is good for short, quick things."

Not all of the students agreed that texting was quick and easy. One of the boys who considered himself to be an infrequent texter explained that: "I think it is just easier to call someone and say what needs to be said rather than [typing] a whole big spill of text." Another boy complained that "text messages can go on for days" since, unlike face-to-face or telephone conversations, there are fewer physical constraints that necessitate ending a conversation.

For most of the participants, however, text messaging was the first choice for contacting close friends because of the speed and simplicity of sending and receiving

messages. As one of the girls explained: "Normally everyone else has their phones right by them, so you can get an answer back right away."

This preference for quick communication means that librarians should be careful to make library contact information easy to find on all library pages, and that librarians should try to provide quick responses to electronic requests for help. It also means that teens are unlikely to spend time searching for links to social network pages and to other online services if they are hidden a few clicks beyond the library's homepage. Visibility and speed of access are key for engaging teens' interest and participation.

**Constant Contact**

Frand (2000) suggested that for today's young adults: "constant connectivity—being in touch with friends and family at any time and from any place—is of utmost importance" (p. 15). Especially in the case of texting with close friends, the students in this study wanted to be able to carry on conversations and other mediated interactions, as one student said, "any place, at any time." Most of the students had at least one tool for mediated communication within easy reach at all times. One of the boys described his daily use of Facebook as lasting for hours: "Right when I get home, I just log onto Facebook and leave it on in the background for the rest of the night. And when I am out doing other things, I am texting or calling people."

Another one of the boys explained his frequent electronic communication patterns with his girlfriend and closest friends as varying in frequency, yet occurring on a nearly daily basis:

I am always connected to my girlfriend… I have a group of friends that text me or call me on a regular basis, and out of them it might be one in a day or a couple of them [who text or call me each day]. Some days are higher than others.

The nearly universal ownership of cell phones enabled this high rate of electronic communication, making cell phones virtually constant presences in these students' lives. Nearly all of them carried cell phones to school, to work, and to social events, making them "always connected" to their close friends. As one of the boys explained: "I got an iphone, and I got a Facebook application on my iphone. I have had it for almost a month, and it has never left my body. It has been in my pocket or next to my bed…never more than three feet away."

It's important to note that the students who could access Facebook via cell phones were much more avid users of social networks than those who were limited just to computer access. Discussing his preference for texting over social networking, one of the boys explained that "Facebook has a lot more information, but you have to be at a computer to use it. So it is not really mobile." This means libraries need to be aware that students from more advantaged backgrounds—those more likely to have high-capability cell phones—are more likely to be heavy social network users than those from less advantaged backgrounds, simply due to access issues. This is an important consideration when designing library services to deliver via social networks. Librarians need to be careful to provide the same services via alternate technologies so that teens with access limitations can participate on an equal level as those with ready access.


**Multitasking**

A common theme that runs through the discussions of the online communication habits of today's teens is their heavy use of multitasking (see, for example, Brown 2000, Foehr 2006, Frand 2000, and Wallis 2006). For most of the teens in this study, multitasking was indeed a habitual behavior, and they preferred ICT's that could support their multitasking habits. For example, one of the boys explained that his most typical online activities included listening to music, checking Facebook, checking online sports scores, watching videos on YouTube, texting, playing games, doing homework, and emailing—usually all at once. Most of the students agreed that they multitasked while doing homework in particular: "Last night I was on the library [website] here, and I had Twitter open. I also had my Gmail open, *NY Times*, and Microsoft Word open, and I still did my [school] project in half an hour."

Another reason for the popularity of texting was that it lent itself especially well to multitasking. As one of the boys explained: "You can almost do anything that doesn't require two hands and text at the same time." Most of the participants agreed that texting while in the presence of others was so common that "In most cases I won't notice." On the other hand, they disapproved if the texter became too distracted to participate in the face-to-face conversation:

> It can be annoying…. I was driving in a car with a friend of mine and she was texting, but she couldn't keep the conversation going with me and text at the same time without stopping. So there were breaks in our conversation. But if you can text and keep a conversation fluid, I don't see a problem with that.

When asked why they chose to multitask, there was general agreement that multitasking relieved boredom: "I know that I have gotten so use to a high-paced lifestyle

that I am uncomfortable and uneasy when things slow down. If I am just at home with nothing to do, I am unsure what to do with myself."

As far as library services are concerned, librarians need to realize that teens are likely to engage in multiple activities while taking part in online library services and programs. This means that rather than using a social network page to promote just one activity or information medium, such as just providing online reviews of new YA books or just creating a collaborative blog for teens, librarians should provide teens with a variety of online activity choices, including activities that can be undertaken simultaneously. For example, a library could use its Facebook page to provide links to popular music sharing sites and to book recommendations and to a teen collaborative blog.

**SO WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN FOR LIBRARY SERVICES TO TEENS?**

Now that we understand how teens are using social networks and other ICT's for communication and information purposes, the question becomes how best to harness these tools for the effective delivery of library services. From this study, we can learn at least four rules to guide the design of online library services for teens: 1) Use multiple contact methods; 2) Employ frequent updating and maintenance; 3) Help teens stay connected by providing access; and 4) Talk to teens to understand their changing communication and information needs.

**Lesson #1: Use Multiple Contact Methods**

To date, most libraries have focused on the library website as the one main tool for the delivery of online library services to teens.  Our study shows that teens use an array of social networks and ICT's, and that for most teens, library websites are not among the most frequently used of these tools.  To gain the attention of teens who are often online but who are not as often on the library's website, librarians should use multiple online tools to promote their services and collections, as well as providing links to connect the library's various online programs and services to each other.

Further, this study indicates that teens are often uncomfortable friending adults such as teachers and librarians.  Many teens are, however, willing to join library pages on Facebook and other social networks.  This makes organizational social network pages good tools for providing basic library contact information, upcoming program announcements, blurbs promoting new book and media acquisitions, contact points for homework assistance, and more.  Of course, for teens who do use library websites or for teens looking to connect to the library via social networks, there should be clearly labeled, prominent links between the library website and all social network pages to facilitate easy access.

On the other hand, just promoting the library via the library website and one or more social networks ignores the fact that for many teens, the most constant IT presence in their lives is the cell phone, and their preferred method of cell phone communication is text messaging.  Since cell phone texting is typically limited to communicating with a small group of intimate friends and sometimes close family members, teens are unlikely to want to send or receive frequent generic texts to and from librarians.  Instead, librarians can use cell phone texting and even talking on cell phones to provide more

specialized library services to teens, such as reference and research assistance, which are less frequent and more intimate interactions than program promotion and public relations efforts.

In addition, young people's growing reliance on mobile devices as information sources points to the value of creating applications for those devices. Catalog and database applications, as well as access to student resources, should be available to young people interested in accessing them via their cell phones. In view of teens' heavy use of texting via cell phones, text-a-librarian services might become increasingly popular as well.

**Lesson #2: Employ Frequent Updating and Maintenance**

The use of these multiple technologies to reach teens can only remain effective if librarians are willing to be flexible and to change their service delivery modes as teens' ICT uses and preferences change. For example, a couple of years ago the majority of the teens in this study were avid MySpace users. In just a few short years, nearly all of them abandoned MySpace in favor of Facebook. If a library had been providing services to them via MySpace, the power of MySpace for reaching them would likely have diminished greatly with the onset of Facebook dominance. And while Twitter had not gained popular ground at the time our focus groups were held, it is possible that more students would be tweeting and following Twitter feeds if we interviewed them again now. In order to remain effective, the library in this example would have had to migrate its services from MySpace to Facebook, and then it would have had to be prepared to move them again and again every few years or even more frequently as new social

networks and even new technologies were to emerge and dominate teens' online use patterns.

In addition to periodically reevaluating which social networks and other ICT's are best for reaching teens, the content provided via these tools must be kept up-to-date and visible. It's not enough just to create a library page on a social network, link it to the library website, and hope that it garners a lot of teen followers. When most of the teens in this study were asked, they couldn't remember how many organizations and causes they had joined via social networks, or even which ones they had joined. If libraries just enable teens to identify as fans or friends of their pages and then do little else, teens will likely forget about them. If librarians want to stay in teens' minds, they need to frequently update their social network pages and to announce the updates to users. Posting notices of new photos from successful teen programs and announcements of forthcoming events, for example, can remind teens that the library is there for them to use, both online and in person. It's a simple marketing rule that people use a service more frequently if they are reminded on a regular basis that it exists. The same is true of communicating with teachers and other adult collaborators about the library's electronic services. Frequent messages are necessary to stay in potential collaborators' minds and to remind them of the ongoing value of collaboration.

### Lesson #3: Help Teens Stay Connected by Providing Access

This study also shows us how important it is for most teens to maintain constant electronic contact with their close friends, and sometimes with their family members as well. While it is unlikely that most teens would want to remain in constant contact with

their public or school librarians, this does mean that an important ongoing role for libraries is enabling teens to remain connected to the people in their own personal social networks.  Particularly for teens who lack easy access to social networks and other ICT's, libraries can help teens stay connected to the online social world by providing access to popular social networks and other forms of social media, such as YouTube and other digital content sharing sites.  Unfortunately, many public and school libraries block access to these tools, thinking that they promote time wasting instead of realizing that they can help teens learn developmentally-beneficial communication and information practices.  We can use these online spaces to celebrate young people's creative content--their digital stories, art work, book reviews, discussions, and trailers, etc.--and to provide them with places for healthy self-expression.

Librarians can help to lift these access barriers in public libraries or school library media centers by developing programs and forming collaborations with teachers and/or school administrators and other library professionals with the goal of educating each other about the benefits of providing access to social networking sites. Librarians can also serve as advocates for teens by providing more information about the benefits of social networking to teens' communities (parents, teachers, and other key players in teens' everyday life experiences).

**Lesson #4: Talk to Teens to Understand their Changing Communication and Information Needs**

For these teens, Facebook and texting via cell phones were the clear communication modes of choice, but these top choices will likely change in a few years,

and then change again and again as communication and information technologies continue to evolve. As one of the boys said: "They'll always keep making new technologies to keep us in touch with each other." As a result, the importance of involving teens in the design of electronic library services cannot be overstated. The real experts of teens' thoughts and behaviors are teens themselves, and the best way to keep library services relevant to teens' evolving interests and behaviors is to create formal and informal avenues for the ongoing collection of teen input. These avenues can include teen advisory boards, teen idea and design teams, periodic surveys, informal focus groups, volunteering and internship opportunities, and other informal conversations with teens.

Also of importance is for librarians to keep their knowledge and skills up-to-date when it comes to learning about the latest social networks and other technologies popular with teens. The best way to do this is to use these tools to learn more about their potential for reaching out to, and providing library services to, teens. This means that librarians should set up their own MySpace or FaceBook pages, or practice using the tools by creating library profiles and library pages within these networks. Librarians interested in keeping their technology skills up-to-date can also try different ways of communicating with teens to see what works best within their own library communities. Reading the professional literature and popular press reports about social networking tools and ICTs, and attending professional development workshops at library and other conferences, are also good ways to learn what new technologies are being developed and how they might be adopted by teens.

Lastly, librarians should become advocates for teens and social networking as a way to help parents, guardians, teachers, and other adults come to learn about the social and educational benefits of engaging in online social networking. Advocacy can take the form of writing about experiences and sharing successes *and lessons learned* through the development of professional and local programs. Good venues for sharing success stories include library blogs, professional journals, professional conferences, and library and school community listservs.

## CONCLUSION

Above all, public and school librarians need to take their services and programs to where today's teens are, and today's teens are very often online in social networks or texting via cell phones. We are not challenging the ongoing importance of physical library buildings or of face-to-face library services. Libraries have been around in one form or another for many hundreds (even thousands!) of years, and we believe that they will continue to exist for many centuries to come. The format of our libraries, however, must change as user needs and behaviors evolve, and the same is true of our service delivery modes. Electronic library services to teens should complement, but not replace, face-to-face services, and librarians should consider how instruction and services can be offered as hybrids. Delivering library services to teens via social networks and other ICT's is one way that librarians can ensure that future generations will continue to value and use their school and public libraries as teens' communication and information practices move increasingly into the online social world.

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