

# Social Aspects of Digital Literacy

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## INTRODUCTION

To be able to evaluate digital information as well as develop perceptions of and respect for social norms and values for functioning in the digital world is crucial. Yet the competencies and skills that new generations require to be successful in the digital era are still largely not being taught in schools. However, the weak points in formal education can open opportunities for youth services to use less formal venues, more adaptable means, and novel digital technologies to reach, guide, and educate youth in their transition to adulthood. This article:

- Addresses the social prospects of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use among youth;
- Describes the online behavior of young people on the Internet, which paradoxically provides opportunities for social development while introducing social risks;
- Informs educators and youth services about which factors to consider in designing flexible, innovative, and inclusive programs for young people to enable them to successfully function in the era of the Internet, new media, and computer technologies.

## BACKGROUND

Over the past 10 years, ICTs have become increasingly accessible in most countries. ICTs like personal computers, cell phones, and the Internet can be used for both in-school and out-of-school activities, and are particularly suitable for connecting individuals and communities globally (Beetham, McGill, & Littlejohn, 2009). Using these tools appropriately for living, learning, and working in a digital society is deemed being digitally literate (Beetham, 2010). However, these competencies and skills are not being taught effectively in schools (Martinovic, Freiman, & Karadag, 2011). Jenkins (2006) found that youth were not taught how to participate safely in such social online practices as information sharing and collaboration, despite the dangers for unskilled users. Indeed, some authors (Martinovic & Magliaro, 2007; Noveck, 2000) have emphasized the importance of understanding the paradoxical nature of the Internet, where one can be confronted with limitless information while obtaining less knowledge; where access is relatively cheap, but the environment is increasingly commercialized; and where communities do form, but atomization prevails.

Livingstone (2008) examined the dichotomy of optimistic and pessimistic opinions from academics and media on how ICTs affect young people:

1. Optimists emphasized opportunities for self-expression, sociability, community engagement, creativity, and new literacies. They envisioned change in social dynamics, with youth involvement in the co-creation of innovative and counter-consumerist cultures both locally and globally. Public policy-makers and educators saw opportunities for engaging youth in collaborative learning and various online government services.
2. Pessimists associated youth behavior on social networking sites with loss of privacy and lack of shame. They considered social networking as time-wasting and socially isolating activities that could have far-reaching negative effects on the personal safety of the users. Some feared that youth growing up in the digital age might become incapable of understanding emotional nuances and reading social cues, and hence, might lack empathy (Stout, 2010). The pessimists noted that cyberbullying resulted in behavioral changes and deep emotional problems among its victims (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007) and that communicating with both peers and strangers via the Internet might have particularly adverse effects on the well-being of lonely adolescents (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). And Ben-David Kolikant (2010) found that young people themselves recognized that using the Internet for schoolwork might encourage taking shortcuts, cheating, laziness, and low school morale, and could hinder the development of study skills.

These examples highlight the need for youth to be digitally literate to be able to navigate between the opportunities and traps created by introducing different ICTs into their everyday social life.

## **SOCIAL ONLINE PRACTICES OF YOUTH**

### **Issues, Controversies, Problems**

Current statistics reveal that about 78.6% of North Americans and 63.2% of Europeans use the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2012), and growth in Internet use in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America in the last 10 years can be measured in thousands of percent.

Canadian youth appear to follow these trends. One Canadian study, *Young Canadians in a Wired World* (Media Awareness Network, 2001–2012), looked at the online behavior, attitudes, and opinions of more than 5200 children and youth from grades 4 to 11 in French- and English-language schools in every province and territory. The report revealed that in 2005, young Canadians were almost universally connected to the Internet through the household computer, personal computer, and/or cell phone, and were active users of ICTs. The participants in this study described their online experiences as generally positive and socially rewarding. But they also reported being exposed to inappropriate content and risky situations such as bullying and sexual harassment that might compromise their integrity and privacy, and they highlighted the need to learn how to distinguish credible from non-credible information on the Internet.

We now address the issues of formation of identity, friendship, participatory culture, and political engagement in the context of ICT use, following the example of the literature, which classifies the social development of young people in part as a function of age.

## **Identity Formation**

### *Primary School Children*

Between ages 7 and 12, which we define as the stage of emerging digital literacy, digital life experiences of children are determined by the ICTs available at home and in school and by the degree to which access and use are restricted by parents, educators, laws, etc.

Henke and Fontenot (2007) studied how 39 fourth-graders (ages 9–11) from a small New Hampshire town used the Internet and found that (a) the children were already veteran Internet users (i.e., had at least two years of experience), (b) they were able to identify the persuasive intent of commercial Websites and to distinguish between the informational and entertainment functions of non-profit and government Websites, and (c) they were unwilling to substitute other social activities for Internet use, even though this use was overseen by teachers, parents, and older siblings.

### *Adolescents*

Issues of identity and privacy become even more important during the increasing socialization of youth aged 12–18. Hundley and Shyles (2010) conducted

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