

Chapter 11

Millenials, Social Networking and Social Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the author explores Millenials' participation in the public good, investigating whether they use social networking for social responsibility. Millenials, the wired, connected generation for whom social networking is an essential aspect of life, are often criticized for their lack of social responsibility. Social networking, as new media uniquely a part of Millenials' wired and connected lifestyles, has the potential to "transform citizenship." To investigate Millenials' social networking and social responsibility, a Webnography was conducted. Findings go against conventional wisdom as the author found that Millenials use social networking to take social and political action, engage in social entrepreneurship, and conduct charitable solicitation and donation.

INTRODUCTION

Having grown up with the Internet and digital technologies, today's youth are the most wired and connected generation in human history. Members of this generation are constantly connected to each other—by cell phone, text messages, instant messaging (IM) and email—and continually plugged into the world of information on the Web, as will be demonstrated in the literature review. Although much has been written about this wired generation,

most academic and popular writings about social networking focus on young people's personal and social use of social networking sites—sites such as MySpace, FaceBook, and YouTube. While academics are increasingly interested in the pedagogical potential of social networking sites, an area that remains neglected is the role of social networking in the public good. As Hamilton and Flanagan (2007) note, there is "little extant research on social responsibility within close peer relationships." Such research is, however, important as the country looks to Millenials for greater and more positive participation in the public good.

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BACKGROUND

The term “Millenial” (also spelled Millennial) denotes that generation of young people born after the advent of the Internet. Although variously called the Net Generation, Echo Boomers and the Digital Generation, among other names, this generation is *self-styled* “Millenials” after several thousand of them sent suggestions about what they want to be called to Peter Jennings at abcnews.com (Sweeney 2008). Millenials are unique in that their exposure to the Internet and digital technologies is lifelong, but also in the extent of their connectivity through the internet and digital technologies.

The Internet features prominently in Millenials’ everyday lives (McMillan and Morrison 2006). For example, a recent Pew study found that 64% of adolescent (12 to 17 years old) were actively engaged in creating and sharing material on the Internet. Teenagers not only blogged, posted photos and posted videos but equally importantly “participated in conversations fueled by that content” (Lenhart, Madden, Rankin Macgill & Smith, 2007).

The phenomenal growth of social networking Web sites has promoted and stimulated adolescents’ online lives. Social networking sites are screened sites where users build personal networks that connect them to other users. The most popular of these sites are Facebook and MySpace. A Pew study found that 75% of young adults (18-24 years old) use social networking sites (Lenhart, 2009), up from 55% of all adolescents (12 to 17 years old) (Lenhart, 2007). This makes it clear that Millenials’ social lives revolve around the integration of the Internet.

Social networking has been intimately linked with social responsibility. Micromobilization research (Sherrod, 2006) finds that people’s social ties can promote activism. Individuals with ties to social structures (that is, their social connections) will participate in the public good if their social ties engage them to do so. “Social network

ties are critical determinants of social movement participation” (Sherrod, 2006, p. 597). Therefore the active social networking of adolescents offers them excellent opportunities to participate in socially responsible activities. Yet although social networking sites provide an effortless and convenient means for Millenials’ communication and participation in social activities, they do not appear to have taken advantage of this opportune technology to participate in the public good. America’s youth are charged with a lack of social responsibility.

The popular press abounds with criticism of Millenials’ lack of involvement in the public good. Thomas Friedman, columnist for the *New York Times*, labeled Millenials the quiet generation or “Generation Q” as they are too quiet and lacking in what he calls “idealism, activism and outrage” (Friedman, 2007). A popular youth website supports Friedman’s charge, noting that student “dis-engagement rates are at all-time highs, and costing billions in lost economic opportunities and crime” (www.tigweb.org). Although academic research on Millenial’s involvement in the public good is scarce, some research supports the contentions of the popular press. For example, Robert Putnam (2000, cited in Arnett, 2007) says that 18–29 year-olds report less civic engagement than their parents or grandparents when they were the same age. Limber and Kaufman (2004) found that active community participation among youth was very low. They argue that participation by youth is important not just for young people, but for their communities and their countries. Malaney (2006) agrees, both on lack of youth participation and on the importance of social activism and civic engagement for students.

As Malaney (2006) noted, it is a necessity for youth to “bridge this apparent gap between our current world reality and our desire to teach civic responsibility, humanitarianism, equality, and social justice.” Community participation, social responsibility and participation in the public good are essential for young people on both personal

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