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The Internet Generation

by Scott Stiffler
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What's the matter with kids today? They've got a language, behavior and value system all their own, right?

If you said yes, chances are you're a parent -- or, at the very least, starting to show your age. Since the beginning of time, people have been dismissing the new generation as the one whose fundamental differences and glaring flaws are sure to doom the species -- and up until now, they were wrong. But the present crop of teens and 20-somethings is the first to have grown up with the presence of the Internet -- which has produced undeniably real changes in the way they communicate and form identity. Whether this leads to evolution or extinction remains to be seen; but a number of experts are game to weigh in on why it happened and what it means.



The Net Generation

"For teenagers and young people in their early 20s, the Internet is part of their cultural space. So for somebody growing up 20 years ago, there's a real difference today," says Caitlin Ryan, Director of Adolescent Health Initiatives at the César E. Chávez Institute at the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University. "It's an emotionally charged issue for older people who had to sneak around in the library to find information about who they were."

Ryan, a clinical social worker focusing on the health & mental health needs of LGBT adolescents and young adults, likens to the social aspect of Internet activity to "putting a front porch on your house; you've extended your space and opened it up to the outside world...it's amplified the capacity for LGBT young people to find out who they are, to imagine themselves in a way that would not have been possible twenty years ago."

Dr. Larry Rosen, Professor of Psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills and author of "Me, MySpace and I: Parenting the Net Generation," notes how "Psychologists have talked for decades about the fact that the teenage and early adult years are a search for yourself; a search for identity. The age that kids come out is much earlier and it's primarily because they are coming out online; just over 13 today, compared to the '90s when teens came out between 14 and 16 years of age, and certainly younger than decades before, when teens did not dare reveal their homosexuality until they were adults."

That the current generation is looking for, and forming, identity through electronic means is no surprise to Rosen. This generation, he explains, takes in stride and for

granted what seems revolutionary to those born just a mere decade before: "These kids, their entire social life is online. It's almost trivial for them to do it; this stuff comes so naturally for them. That's why the timing for MySpace was perfect. A whole generation was sitting at home looking to have a social life. With the Baby Boomers, our social life was primarily outdoors. Generation Xers spent their time hanging out outside, but inside: out of the house, but in the mall or the movie theater. This generation, which I like to call the Net Generation, has been born into a world where the outside and the mall are not safe anymore. Their parents, or parent, are working and are not real happy about the prospect of them being anywhere out of the house."

Wesley Combs, President of Witeck-Combs Communication, concurs with Rosen's assessment of cyberspace as a place of perceived security for a generation who's found it to be "the safest place to learn about their community and meet people; so they've adapted that behavior to the overall acquisition of information. They're learning about something through a blog, then they pass that it on to other people they know through means like instant messaging. . .the people in their 20s that I know; more have iPhones than not. They bring the web up as you are talking to them. They are much more likely to jump on the phone without thinking if it is costing them anything."

But why surf the web for a sense of community and self -- other than the fact that all of this technology is cool, helpful and everybody else is doing it? Patricia Greenfield, Director, Children's Digital Media Center, UCLA/CSULA, says "There are two reasons: first, they can get personal because the audience is virtual, not face-to-face. Even though you are not anonymous in a social network site, it is disinhibiting. You have hundreds of 'friends' but not one is present."

Greenfield compares the confessional aspect of being online to "the psychoanalyst's couch, where the patient is not face-to-face, so he or she tells all." Greenfield's second reason speaks directly to the experience of LGBTs: "A minority group in the very diverse real world becomes a self contained homogenous group in the world of a targeted website. This virtual community creates its own social norms. Therefore, participants develop a sense of normality that a minority group never has. This provides a sense of security for self expression."



How MTV Shaped MySpace

Of all the things MTV has been blamed for, the glorification of self-disclosure just might be the charge that sticks. In 1992, "The Real World" took MTV viewers away from the endless rotation of music videos and into the realm of a strange new area of programming not yet called Reality TV. Now in production of its 20th season, it tells the "true story...of seven strangers...picked to live in a house...who work together and have their lives taped...to find out what happens when people stop being polite...and start getting real."

This bold new form of television showed a generation how glamorous prejudices, petty grievances and drunken hot tub hijinks could be. The show is also notable for third season cast member Pedro Zamora, an AIDS activist who was among the first out, gay and HIV positive men to obtain a national profile.

"It's no accident Reality TV became a programming trend just prior to the popularity of online self disclosure in the form of blogs and social networking sites." says Mark Andrejevic, Associate Professor, Communication Studies, University of Iowa and author of Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched. "Reality TV told us anybody can be a TV star. It threw open the doors of celebrity to the general public. More than that, it taught us that self disclosure was therapeutic, a form of self exploration; a means of asserting one's self identity."

John Edward Campbell, currently a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for

Communications (U of PA) and author of *Getting It on Online: Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality and Embodied Identity*, believes "The younger generation seem predisposed to broadcast personal information on the net" in large part because "They have been raised in a culture of reality TV that carries this message that by opening your life up to the world, you can become a celebrity. Anyone can become a celebrity on the Internet and it is reinforced by this culture of reality TV where people are opening themselves up."

Commenting upon how Reality TV exploits those in their formative years, Adrejevic observes how "producers find it desirable to draw upon young cast members, in part because that age group is one that is easy to exploit; they have time, they are willing to perform for the camera in ways people who are more experienced might not, and they're at that time of life where they are experimenting with their portrayal of themselves."

Yet far from viewing their experience as exploitative, most participants inevitably leave the show saying "how much I learned, grew and changed. This equates self disclosure with a form of self knowledge and self expression. That carries over to the Internet; how blogging is a way to learn about themselves; how social networking sites are a form of creative expression. It invokes the Reality TV promise that self disclosure is a form of self discovery; of working on one's self and dealing with one's issues."

Social networking is the electronic equivalent of the diary - except instead of keeping it under lock and key to protect one from the mortifying prospect of having your deepest secrets revealed to the world, it promises liberation, admiration and peer credibility through full disclosure. For Rosen, teens and young adults are revealing themselves "in a very specific way, by going onto MySpace or Facebook. They go to where it says sexual orientation and they change it from hetero-to-homo-or-bi. It's an issue of putting their foot in the water a little bit; to see what kind of responses they get. Since these kids collect friends, they get a lot of comments." Rosen's book documents the fact that "MySpace alone has more than fifty thousand groups centered on gay issues where teens can post questions, make comments or simply remain in the background and observe how other similar teens handle their lifestyle."



Exploring Identity On MySpace

With so much emphasis being put on this generation's love affair with electronic communications, it's easy to forget that not everyone has the means (even though they possess the skills) to come home from school and go online -- especially if home either is not a welcoming place or doesn't exist at all. Kevin Lotz, is a social worker and Director of [Trinity Place Shelter](#), an Upper West Side facility in New York City that serves homeless youth.

Lotz: "When we opened the shelter almost two years ago, I was struck by how many homeless youth had cell phones. Prepaid lends itself well to those with a limited income. If they get a few bucks, they can put that towards minutes."

The shelter, which has free Internet access to encourage youth to create resumes and find jobs, does not come with or require an instructor: "We've never had to teach them how to use a computer; they know their way around it. There

is a computer lab at the LGBT center; several of our youth go there. It's cheap; a couple bucks an hour. Nearly all of the youth in our shelter grew up in low-income communities of color with very limited access to technology -- which further complicates and disenfranchises their 'coming out' and formation of LGBT identity. The family systems are often strained and chaotic and they did not have the opportunity to sit in chat rooms for extended periods of time or unlimited internet access."

Daniel Randall, a youth currently with Trinity Place, says "I use My Space because it's friendly and I met a lot of people." He sees the net as "cool, but it's also bad. For somebody 14 to 17, they're putting themselves out there and risk getting hurt. They're young and new to it and a lot of them don't have family resources to say I am gay. Instead, they go on a computer and yell out loud."

Randall believes that social services (and society in general) should be doing more to "teach young gays what's trouble, what's not; the negative things about the Internet." Despite economic difficulties, Lotz is constantly "impressed at the innovative ways they are able to integrate technology into their lives despite living under transient or turbulent circumstances. Youth have found ways to embrace technology; they have MySpace pages as a way to form or explore identity. It's a virtual opportunity to have something that they have some sort of ownership over; and it lends itself well to youth that are homeless; you don't have to carry it anywhere."



Privacy Issues & Surveillance

Campbell, who talks about privacy issues and generational naïveté in the classes he teaches, is currently researching online surveillance, online privacy and new media. Campbell and his colleagues who work in the field of surveillance studies are "fascinated by the willingness of people to disclose personal info bout themselves online. It's the fact that they do it

through commercial sites like Gay.com, iVillage, MySpace and Facebook." He encourages people to, whenever they visit a commercial site and fill out profiles, keep in mind that "these sites ask for very personal information which we willingly provide. People are clearly unaware of how personal information is being gathered and what use it is being put to by marketers and corporations. Most Americans are under the mistaken impression that if a site has a privacy policy, they do not share your information with anyone else -- but web site privacy policy is a document that's designed to protect the site or the corporation."

These sites then sell your information to marketers who compile databases that target groups of desirable customers worth pursuing -- a practice which Campbell describes as being "a means by which you exclude certain populations from your particular marketing campaign, so you are only reaching those relevant to your products. Gay.com used to ask for HIV status. If you give your status to Gay.com, they and sell it to Axiom.com. An insurance company might go to Axiom and say we want to send out insurance policies, but eliminate HIV positive because they are too high of a risk group."

Andrejevic sees the casual disclosure of personal information as a new quality unique to "the first generation to grow up with the Internet, who has different attitudes about privacy. They see self disclosure in its positive aspect, whereas in the Cold War and post-Cold War era, there were concerns about privacy and being monitored. This generation doesn't seem to have those concerns."

As it applies to young people, Campbell links that lack of concern to a "naïveté over how information flows" and also describes the long-term consequences of having an electronic record compiled from youth to old age -- affecting everything from your college application to employment background checks (your chances of nailing that scholarship may be significantly decreased when the panel of judges sees photos of your beer bong prowess posted on your MySpace page).

Campbell: "Younger people, despite their computer savvy, don't yet appreciate all the implications that come with that. There's a myopic mindset that this information is only going to reach the people I want it to, and this is certainly not the case."

Scott Stiffler is a New York City based writer and comedian who has performed stand-up, improv, and sketch comedy. His solo shows include Damaged by the 70s and An Evening With Insane Mark Twain & Dead Bette Davis. He must eat twice his weight in fish every day, or he becomes radioactive.



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