

*HOW TO MAKE A ME:
CONSTRUCTING
ADOLESCENT IDENTITY
IN THE DIGITAL AGE*

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Digital Media

- Social Networking
- Gaming
- Smartphones
- Online Profiling

Access to Digital Media

Is limited by...

- Social class
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Family/Community

Access to Digital Media

Two Categories of Non-Users

- Disenfranchised
- Conscientious Objectors

Questions

What impact does virtual connectivity have on how children see themselves?

What impact does virtual connectivity have on how children experience intimacy?

Concerns

- As children distribute and publicize themselves, do they *abandon* themselves?
- Does virtual intimacy degrade or obscure actual intimacy?

Concerns

- Do digital media reduce their expectations of each other and of us?
- Do digital connections offer the illusion of friendship without its demands?
- Does the Internet encourage true freedom of expression, or are young people actually being regulated and constrained as before but just in subtler ways?

Concerns

- Are digital acts of connection being seen as true intimacy?
- If we can always be in touch, do we retain the right to remain alone?
- Is online connectivity nothing more than a new, shiny and appealing way to hide from and avoid each other and ourselves?

Concerns

Second Life...a place to “connect, shop, work, love, explore, be different, free yourself, free your mind, change your looks love your looks, love your life...”

Is loving your life on-line the same thing as loving your life for real?

Or the same thing as living your life?

Concerns

- Real life for children and adolescents provides little opportunity for free-play and experimentation—but *Second Life* and *SIMS on-line* do...

Technology in a Historical Perspective

The dialectic of technology

- We create it as it, in turn, helps to create us
- It is both socially shaped and socially shaping

Technology in a Historical Perspective

- Technology, particularly communications technology, always changes “the rules of engagement”
- It re-visits, re-draws, and re-defines the boundary between intimacy and solitude, between selfhood and otherhood, between depth and superficiality

*Technology in a
Historical Perspective*

- We have always turned to communications technology both for ways to connect, as well as for ways to *protect ourselves* from connecting

*Technology in a
Historical Perspective*

- *Letters*, then
- *Telegrams*, then
- *Telephone*, then
- *Answering machines*, then
- *E-mailing*, then
- *Texting*, then
- *Tweeting*

*Technology in a
Historical Perspective*

Pagers used to be a burden—now, in one form or another, they're *obligatory*, representing both *prison* and *freedom*

*Technology in a
Historical Perspective*

The Litany of Social Ills:

- Addiction
- Anti-social behavior
- Obesity
- Educational underachievement
- Commercial exploitation
- Stunted imagination

*Technology in a
Historical Perspective*

Digital Natives (Prensky)

- Different style of learning
- Crave Interactivity
- Value Graphics more than Words
- Dissatisfied with old styles of instruction
- Different brain structure

*Technology in a
Historical Perspective*

Growing up Digital (Tapscott)

TV Generation vs. Internet Generation

- TV is passive, Net is active
- TV dumbs down, Net raises intellect
- TV broadcasts singular view of the world,
Net is democratic and interactive
- TV isolates, Net builds communities

Tapscott (cont.)

- TV generation is conservative, inflexible, and centralized, Net generation is hungry for expression, discovery, and self-development, analytical, articulate, creative, inquisitive, accepting of diversity, socially conscious

Tapscott (cont.)

TV generation is incompetent technophobes, Net generation possesses intuitive spontaneous relationship with technology

Technology in a Historical Perspective

Technology will...

- Create new styles of communication and interaction
- Go beyond authoritarian approach of old-style education
- Create new competencies
- Create more complex brain structures

Technology will...(cont.)

- Lead to a new kind of politics
- Become a medium for social awakening
- Produce a more tolerant, globally oriented generation more inclined to exercise social and civic responsibility and respect the environment

Historical Perspective

- Up until the 1980's, our relationship with computers was essentially one-on-one with the computer...
- Since then, the computer has become a vehicle enabling people to connect with *other people* in a variety of ways around the entire world

General Concern

- What does the virtual world do to us as well as for us?
- How do we help children and teens learn "the rules" when we don't even know "the rules" ourselves?
- Are "weak ties" overwhelming "strong ties", to everyone's ultimate disadvantage?

General Concern

What are we missing, and what are we not offering to our children, that makes all of us so vulnerable to technologies that can so effectively buffer us from the best that intimacy and solitude have to offer us?

The Ambivalent Embrace

Digital Media disrupts the power relations between adults and youth—not only must we see children and teens as legitimate social and political participants, but we must also recognize them as innovators and engines of change

Mobilizing digital media to push back at existing structures

The Ambivalent Embrace

Pivoting between irrational fear/panic and elevated hopes/wishes...

“Digital children are our best hope for the future”

“Digital culture represents a dangerous departure from existing standards for knowledge, literacy, and civic engagement”

Identity

From the Latin root "*idem*"
which means "*the same*"

- Implies both similarity and difference
- What makes us *unique* and what *connects* us (identifies us) with others

Identity

Identity is something that
we do rather than
something that we are

Identity

Individual identity is increasingly fluid and
infinitely negotiable, affected by external
forces such as:

- Globalization
- Increasing social mobility
- Employment flexibility/instability
- Economic downturn
- Shrinking influence of traditional practices

Identity

- Contemporary youth have a much wider range of choices than ever before, as well as a much wider range of guides
- Multiple ways to fashion their own identities in creative and diverse ways
- But new freedoms place tremendous burdens on young people

Identity

Erik Erikson

Identity vs. Role Confusion

- Increasing awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses
- Increasing confidence in qualities and capacities
- Undergo a crisis which forces them to consolidate their thinking

Identity

James Marcia

Foreclosure—avoids crisis by submitting to others

Diffusion—sidesteps the crisis by not making any commitment

Moratorium—in state of crisis

Achievement—has survived crisis and arrived at integrated, coherent sense of identity

Identity

There always *has been*, and always *will be*, a way for young people to acquire the resources necessary to:

- express their identity
- evade or resist adult authority

Identity Construction

On-line authorship of blogs, webpages, and avatars provides an important opportunity for:

- self-realization and self-reflection
- expressing the conflicts and crises that characterize adolescence

Identity Construction

Social networking provides an opportunity:

- for social interaction and affiliation
- for determining the impact of one's behavior on others
- for ascertaining behavioral and interactive norms
- for negotiating public life

Identity Construction

Adult Power
and the
Appeal of Social Networks

Identity Construction

- An on-line profile is simply a way of assembling parts that can ultimately cohere into a sense of self
- A profile or avatar is part of an evolving statement about who you were, who you are, and who you are becoming
- These are time-honored “rites of passage”

Identity Construction

- A sense of identity emerges not from being one, singular unified self, but from being able to navigate effectively between one’s many different selves without losing site of any of them or of oneself

Identity Construction

- Behind a “screen”, you are protected and freer to make associations with yourself and with others without the burden of expectations

Identity De-Construction

- Conflicts about self-representation are not new to adolescence or to social networking—what is new is living them out in public, permanently and for all to see

Identity De-Construction

- Identity construction reduced to on-line profile production
- Pressure to conform and perform to these simplifications
- Pressure to conform and perform *all of the time*

Identity De-Construction

- Encouraging the belief that a feeling must be shared and validated before it is fully experienced and understood (not *caused* by technology, but supported by it)

Sending/texting/facebooking/IM'ing =
BEING

Identity De-Construction

- An opportunity to ignore other people's feelings through avoiding/missing visual/verbal cues (*slivers of self*)
Hearing laughter, and reading a text that someone is laughing, are two different experiences
- Online life suppresses moral inhibitions

Identity De-Construction

- The evaporation of a sacred space within which identity can germinate and blossom
A vanishing zone of private thought and reflection which interferes with learning how to develop a healthy relationship with *self* and with *others*

Identity De-Construction

- The permanence of perpetually archived identity rehearsals, and their capacity to permanent haunt and shadow
- *Feels private and ephemeral but is exactly the opposite*
- *No room for error on-line*
- *Facebook “scrubbing”*

Identity De-Construction

- Limitless pressure to respond, or to pay the price for not responding
- Limitless temptation to stalk, spy and hack, to attempt to work out interpersonal *conflicts* without interpersonal *contact*
- Limitless pressure to figure out “the rules” (*when does one text, IM, FB wallpost, FB message, etc.*)

Identity De-Construction

Compared to college students of the 1970’s, college students today are less likely to agree with statements such as:

- *“I try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective”*
- *“I often have tender, concerned feelings for those people less fortunate than me”*

Identity De-Construction

- Emphasis on tentative connections, to be abdicated as soon as something better (or perceived as better) comes down the electronic pike
- Losing real friends in the service of virtual, superficial friends
- Blogging versus personal contact (for everyone versus for no one)

Identity De-Construction

- Impossible to sustain a conversation about the complex, sophisticated emotional matters while providing the illusion that it is doing so

Identity De-Construction in the Family

- It is easier to deceive (cellphones vs. landlines)
- No one in the family is fully there at any one time (*physically close, emotionally elsewhere*)

*Identity De-Construction
in the Family*

*Helicopter parents and
Helicopter children*

- *The importance of developmental mourning and loss and how technology can subvert them*
- *The pressure placed on both generations*

*Conversations, Directions and
Solutions*

H.D. Thoreau considering...

"...where I live and what I live for..."

"We cannot respect each other if we stumble over one another..."

*Conversations, Directions and
Solutions*

"At times I've entered the web just to get lost...in that lovely surrender, the web...delivers the unknown...the web is a wilderness...its boundaries are unknown, unknowable, its mysteries uncountable...the web smells like life..."

Kevin Kelly

Conversations, Directions and Solutions

The web can be a place where we *find* ourselves, where we *lose* ourselves, or where we discover unexplored *aspects* of ourselves...or it can be a place for mindless entertainment and brainless pursuits

Conversations, Directions and Solutions

- We usually begin by disparaging what was old in the service of idealizing what is new, defining the new as inevitable so as to abdicate responsibility for learning how to regulate it and ourselves

E-readers and how they invite and divert us to other places besides the book and our mind

Conversations, Directions and Solutions

Technology does not present the greatest risk—what presents the greatest risk is our misguided belief that Technology can solve all of our problems

Unexamined and unbridled, it will generally create more problems than it solves

Conversations, Directions and Solutions

We envision Technology as the best way to address and assuage our deepest fears and sorrows, but, if not well managed, it has the capacity to simply add to them

Conversations, Directions and Solutions

The Addiction Model and Its Liabilities

“Giving Up” Technology
versus

Putting Technology in its Place
and Exploring Our
Vulnerability to it

Conversations, Directions and Solutions

- There is nothing “inevitable” about Technology and its impact
- Everyone—*each generation*—has to learn to put “the device” down
- Technology will never, by itself, give us more time
- Envisioning ourselves as *guides* and *partners* rather than enforcers

Conversations, Directions and Solutions

- Engaging in an exploration of the meaning of what is *private* and *public*
- Considering what we're missing and why we're choosing to give it up
- Asking for time and touch, for care and engagement
- Fighting for stillness and quiet, reflection and introspection...the sacred spaces

Conversations, Directions and Solutions

Embracing our complexity rather than pruning ourselves back
