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Teens and Community in Cyberspace
Or
"Hey, how come nobody's at the mall"
by Merlyn Horton

It used to be easy to find youth; go to the mall or the leisure center and you'd find them in clusters. But it might not be so easy to find them in the near future if Canadian teens continue to increase the time they spend online. Most youth have access to the Internet in their homes and one hundred percent of Canadian schools, and libraries are online as of 1999¹. Youth are accessing the Internet at increasing rates and it is changing their experience of community and communication.

The Internet is vastly different from the media of their parent's generation. Teens are using the Internet to communicate, to gather information, and to connect in ways that used to be limited to places and people geographically close to them and their families. While television's influence in the past could show what was happening elsewhere, there was no opportunity to interact with that world. Teen culture has moved into cyberspace and youth, who may never meet in person, are forming friendships, and communities. Youth are becoming the first Indigenous People of Cyberspace and their culture is developing rapidly.

¹ Canada, Industry Canada, Illegal and Offensive Content on the Internet. Ottawa, 2001, Available Internet <http://www.connect.gc.ca/cyberwise>

This paper will examine emerging teen culture online by first looking at the most recent Canadian statistics showing how many youth are online and what they are doing while there. After that - a brief look at some of the characteristics of adolescent development that make cyberspace an attractive place for teens to play and explore. And finally, several examples of the ways that teen culture is manifesting on the Internet will be examined.

“What are they *doing* in there?”

“Young Canadians in a Wired World”², a report released this year by the Canadian federal government has offered the most comprehensive survey ever undertaken on how Canadian teens are using the Internet. The survey polled 5,682 youth aged nine to 17 and was completed in early 2001. The report reveals that Canada’s teens are a wired generation with 99% reporting they use the Internet to some extent. Of those youth that remember their first experienced with the Internet, almost half were less than ten when they first went online. It appears that the world of modems and email are as normal to today’s youth as the use of the telephone was to children in the 1930’s and VCRs were to children in the 1980’s. It’s part of their world and part of normal communication. Elementary aged children are emailing grandparents weekly. They don’t have to think about how it is that they can play a video game online, with Flash technology; they simply accept it as the norm.

² Government of Canada, Young Canadians in a Wired World- the Student’s View, 2001

Daily Internet use by Canadian youth, while still not eclipsing daily television watching (79%), is a practice of 43% of Canadian youth. While online they are playing and downloading music (57%), dealing with email (56%), and surfing for fun. Youth are also big users of chat rooms (56%) and instant messenger environments (56%). It would appear that much of the time youth are spending online is in settings where they are social. "Youth use the Internet for a variety of activities, especially for social communications activities such as email, instant messenger and chat rooms."³

This isn't a surprise. Teenagers spend a lot of time socializing because it's what they're supposed to be doing; adolescence is a time of creating self-identity and experimenting with social roles and attitudes. This generation would simply appear to be substituting instant messaging and chats for the previous generations' vice of monopolizing the family phone.

"The Internet is fast becoming central to the way kids communicate, access information, and entertain themselves. American teens, in particular, are using the Internet to strengthen their peer groups, (and to) build cross-geographic and consumer communities."⁴

Why are they doing it?

Basic principles of adolescence development influence the way that teens become involved in cyberspace according to John Suler, Ph.D. He has

³ ibid page 11

⁴ Youthworker, A forward-Looking Chat with Quentin Schultze, January/February 2000, available online, <<http://www.youthspecialties.com/ywj/articles/culture/internet.html>>

been a pioneer in the field of psychotherapy in cyberspace since the early 1990's. He observes that several general premises and needs of teens are met in online environments. He highlights adolescent concerns with; identity experimentation, intimacy and belonging, separation from parents and family, and venting frustration and acting out, as factors that affect the ways that youth are becoming involved in cyberspace. ⁵ Youth are using cyberspace the same way they use any other social setting or gather. However, the digital aspects of this social playground have the added elements of time and space and are redefining community.

Suler's observations are similar to the theories of Erik Eriksson who, it is probably safe to guess, never imagined the Internet.

Eric Erickson is the founder of the personal-social development theory. He identified two aspects of adolescent development that would seem to be relevant.

The first ""Identity vs. Role Diffusion,"" requires the individual to question old values and to move gradually towards a more mature sense of identity and purpose. The second task of adolescence is to resolve "Intimacy vs. Isolation,". This task is necessary for the individual to pave the way for establishing and maintaining satisfying personal relationships by learning to share intimacy without inhibition or dread." ⁶

⁵ Suler, John, Ph.D. [Psychology of Cyberspace: Adolescents in Cyberspace, The Good, the Bad and the Ugly](http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/adoles.html). In "Psychology of Cyberspace", Rider University. This article dated June 1998. Available Internet: <http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/adoles.html>

⁶ Health Central, General Health Encyclopedia - [Adolescent Development](http://www.healthcentral.com/mhc/top/002003.cfm) (<http://www.healthcentral.com/mhc/top/002003.cfm>)

These developmental needs of teens to create identity and to engage in social interactions as autonomous individuals have been met in various ways by all generations. The Internet, as opposed to television (the last generation's major media influence), allows for interaction and participation in the medium. It is that very aspect of interaction that leads to cyberspace being a setting for community in ways that television never was.

The evolution of online teen culture has been swift. Five or six years ago it wouldn't even have been considered a factor of Internet communication. Now however, youth are accessing the Internet more and are more proficient at Internet communication than most other age groups in Canadian society. Youth are online in private homes, at school and in libraries; youth are engaging in chat rooms and are surfing the web for information on music, movies, and video games. It is a logical step that online youth culture and communities are beginning to manifest now.

One way to examine youth culture is to look at the types of websites that are offering content to youth. By comparison to chat sites and instant messenger environments which are only tangible in real time and therefore have constantly evolving content, websites remain relatively static. Emailing is also a big activity of youth online but is not available for consideration due to its private nature. Playing and downloading music on the Internet is the most reported activity of Canadian youth (57%)⁷, but it would seem that the best way to get an overview of online youth culture is to look at

⁷ Young Canadians in a Wired World, pg 25

what is on the World Wide Web. A majority of youth report spending time surfing the Web for fun, homework and information. What are youth surfing to on the Web and who is putting that information there? Whose interests are being represented in this emerging culture?

Where to they 'go'?

Some sites aimed at youth are supported and administered by the Canadian government.

YouthFluence⁸ is “a dynamic web site designed to encourage civic literacy and participation among young people in Canada”⁹. The site offers chances to comment on political events, has links to relevant online resources and a bulletin board style discussion forum. The focus is knowledge building and information about civil rights, government programs and initiatives. The site is unique in that it offers chances for youth to establish their own online community and encourages youth advocacy.

Similarly SchoolNet¹⁰, is a large website that offers learning resources, online bulletin boards and technical organization for schools in Canada. The site says

“Welcome to SchoolNet, one of the best educational web sites with over 5,000 Learning Resources, @SchoolNet Today a daily information news

⁸ YouthFluence Available Internet <http://www.youthfluence.com/index.php>

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ Available Internet, <<http://www.schoolnet.ca/home/e/>>

services on the world of e-learning, interactive features such as our polls of the month and the virtual tour and much more!”

The site is supported by Ministries of Education across Canada and is a support network for all schools in the country.

Some sites outside government supported settings, present other kinds of youth content.

Spank! is an online magazine and community that boasts of being the “longest running youth e.magazine @ 2218 days”¹¹, and promotes itself as “youth culture, defined by youth”. Spank! is produced in Calgary AB and is divided into two sections; “Spankopedia” a collection of features, articles, reviews, and material submitted by youth and “Spankforums” an “instant place” to rant, rave, respond, and be yourself.” The forum area has “over 101,151 replies to 8,871 posts”.

The premise of the website is to “Unlike existing publications (in any media), Spank! relies on an Editorial Board comprised of volunteers from (age) 14 to 28 and publishing professionals to ensure it remains focused on youth interests” and any youth who is registered can submit articles, photos or art for publication.

The tone of the website is clearly anti-corporate; the banner on home page says

“5 years of kicking ass over ‘I know best’ corporate exploitation sites”.

¹¹ Spank! Online Magazine, copyright Ububik, 1995 - 2001,2001 <http://www.spankmag.com/>

There is a page called "Support Us" that has a form for advertisers to get more information. The page says, "What we are (is) your best bet for advertising because we aren't an adult's idea of what pop culture is. We are 100% our target audience. We are 100% one of the best sites to reach youth today." Although the Spank! Talks about 'target audience', no overt advertising appears on the site.

This site offers youth the opportunity to post messages, engage in ongoing discussions and to have their ideas, art and articles published in a youth focused setting.

Another website that goes out of its way to keep the focus on youth and off advertising messages is Teen Voices.¹² The rolling banner at the top of this home page says

"Don't let corporate media...

Take over the minds and wallets of young women.

Your subscription makes a difference"

This U.S. based online magazine states its aims as,

"Honoring the authentic voices of teenage and young adult women. Teen Voices challenges the mainstream media's image of girls by providing an intelligent alternative packed with original writing, poetry and artwork. We encourage our readers to write articles on self-esteem,

¹²¹² Available online <<http://www.teenvoices.com/>>

racism, sexism, feminism, popular culture, health, and other issues important to them”¹³

The magazine is supported by donations and subscriptions. The website is run alongside the hard copy magazine.

While Spank! And Teen Voices offer information and an avenue for expression to youth, corporate interests have not missed the allure of the buying power of the youth population.

Youth Pulse - “Get the Buzz on Today's Online Youth”¹⁴ is one example of the corporate interests on the Internet. YouthPulse is a market research company that is gathering information about youth to sell to others in the retail and marketing fields. The information gathered by the research group Harris Interactive, aims to identify youth spending patterns, online attitudes and behaviours.

“These studies focus on deep-rooted motivations and attitudes that predict youth behaviors – family, peers, school, hopes for the future, while shying away from measuring the outward trappings and fads of today’s youth culture.”¹⁵

The brochure goes on to point out that \$165 billion is spent annually by youth motivated opinion. The research is gathered at the websites, harriszone.com and harriskidszone.com. These websites are described as

¹³ Available online <<https://www36.hway.net/teenvo/about.html>>

¹⁴ Harris Interactive <http://www.harrisinteractive.com>

¹⁵ http://www.harrisinteractive.com/pop_up/yp/index.asp

“online communities were a teenager or child can go to have a fun, safe, educational experience – and can openly express their opinions about important issues”.¹⁶

Youth Pulse is a good example of the corporate infiltration of youth culture for economic motivation and according to Quentin Schultze is just the beginning of the impact of multinational corporations on online youth culture. “The large corporations are now figuring out that—if they can create popular Web sites that *appear* to give power to youths by offering them a voice on the sites themselves—they can co-opt youth culture by directing teens to the companies”.¹⁷

His concerns are that corporate interests will appear to be spaces for youth communities to exist but “but always in the context of new products that claim to be “the answer” to boredom, inferiority, unhappiness, and all of the maladies of adolescence”¹⁸.

Subverting youth culture and blurring of the line between authentic expression and marketing will mean that “although teenagers will look at the sites as their own, in reality they’ll just end up being free marketing for the networks.”¹⁹

It is a reality of the evolving Internet industries that corporate interests are struggling to find ways to market consumerist values in the anarchic

¹⁶ http://www.harrisinteractive.com/pop_up/yp/index.asp

¹⁷ “Youthworker, The Contemporary Journal for Youth Ministry Culture”, January/February 2000 “What the Internet Revolution Means for Youth Ministry” available Internet <<http://www.youthspecialties.com/ywj/articles/culture/internet.html>>

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*

environment of cyberspace. Harris Interactive is only one of many marketing oriented corporations whose interest in youth culture is sure to increase.

Other sites that blend the line between government managed and consumer-oriented sites are information-based sites that operate with advertising sponsorship.

These sites often offer advice and support to teens around issues of sexuality, dating, and health concerns.

A search of Webcrawler, a popular search engine, brings up a page with 53 different listings for advice, information and lifestyle websites²⁰. Topics discussed include; problems with parents, dating, school, friendship, sexuality, teenage mothers, teen fathers, friends, family, and drugs. Information ranges from cosmetic to medical. Many of the sites require registration, and include some aspect of interaction with the teen like discussion boards, quotes, surveys, message boards and live chats.

"Go Ask Alice"²¹ is a site that has FAQs, information, and email advice on drugs and alcohol, sexual health, eating disorders, and emotional health. The University of Michigan manages the site. A study published in the December 2000 *Health Education & Behavior* journal names Go Ask Alice! number one for access to specific sexual health information on the Internet. The site has over 2,000 Questions and Answers. The answers on Alice are direct and frank. This site has no advertisements as a university sponsors it.

²⁰ Available Internet, <<http://www.webcrawler.com/lifestyle/teens/advice/>>

²¹ Go Ask Alice!, Columbia University's Health Q&A Internet Service, at Available Internet <<http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/>>

Unfortunately, statistics collected from Canadian youth show that these sites are not very well used. In *Young Canadians in a Wired World*, (pg 15), 62% of youth say they never look up health information, information about their body or for help understanding relationships. Despite this it would seem that there is no shortage of people, or sponsors willing to put advice sites for youth up on the Internet.

And?

The one thing that remains constant for teens is social contact. While the introduction, and continuing efforts to commercialize the Internet never evolved specifically to meet youth needs or to exploit the youth market, it is definitely an aspect that will be continuing to get attention. The evolution of the Internet and the adoption of this new communication medium are only just beginning. While adults and scholars now, maybe well pleased with their analysis and commentary on this evolving medium they will never be the part of the upcoming generation which will accept the Internet as a normal channel of expression and communication. The resulting changes to culture and concept of relationship will continue to unfold as the next generation of people comes of age on the Internet. Hopefully this evolution will not be lost to corporate interests, nor dominated by government mandated content. The future of the Internet and online communities depend on the voice of today's youth being heard. The Internet started as a setting with all potentialities, let's

hope that its diverse potentiality is nurtured for the coming generation of indigenous cybercitizens.

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