Internet and youth culture essay

Technology itself exercises causal influence on social practices, and technological change induces changes in social organization and culture regardless of the social desirability of the change. 2 Sonia Livingstone, Leen d'Haenens, and Uwe Hasebrink, " Childhood in Europe: Contexts for Comparison," Children and Their Changing Media Environment: A European Comparative Study, ed. Sonia Livingstone and Moira Bovill (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001) 3-31. 3 See Tapscott; Prensky. Bruce Bimber, " Three Faces of Technological Determinism," Does Technology Drive History? : The Dilemma of Technological Determinism, ed. Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx 51 THE INTERNET ANDYOUTHCULTURE/MESCH The Social Construction of Technologies This view has created controversy, as others remind us that information and communication technologies are not forces that homogenize young people into a single entity with unique characteristics. Technology is an inherent part of society; it is created by social actors.

According to a social construction of technology approach, it is important to note that social groups differ in the extent of their access to technology, their skills, and the meanings they associate with technology. The same technology can have different meanings for different social groups of users. Technologies can and do have a social impact, but they are simultaneously social products that embody power relationships and social goals Technologies can and do and structures. 5 Thus technological changes are a process have a social impact, but and do not have a single direction.

Understanding the place of the internet in the lives of they are simultaneously social young individuals requires avoiding a purely

determinproducts that embody power iStic interpretation and recognizing the social mbeddedness of technology and its variable outcomes. 6 The relationships and social goals internet can be constitutive of new cultural features of and structures. young social life, but it can also reproduce older conditions. A purely deterministic approach ignores the material conditions and the social environment within which, and through which, these technologies operate.

Digital spaces such as social networking sites, weblogs (blogs), and clip and photo sharing are owned by commercial companies that target youth and try to shape their consumption patterns. At the same time, when using these spaces, youth are becoming mpowered in different social aspects. First, they are able to overcome the limitations of geography by reaching out to others according to specific interests and not only by virtue of residential similarity. Second, they take an important role in society as co- producers of internet content and reach out with their innovative presentations to large and global audiences.

The Internet as Culture and as Cultural Artifact In part, the discrepancy between technological determinism and the view of technology as socially constructed is the result of a lack of clarity about the subject of tudy. 5 Merritt Roe Smith, Military Enterprise and Technological Change: Perspectives on the American Experience (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985). 6 Saskia Sassen, " Towards a Sociology of Information Technology," Current Sociology 50: 3 (2002): 365-88. LeFT: O iStockphoto/doug Schneider Photography.

THE HEDGEHOG REVIEW / SPRING 2009 In this respect, it is useful to distinguish between the internet as culture and the internet as a cultural artifact. 7 To study the internet as a culture means to regard it as a social space in its own right, exploring the forms of consumption and content roduction, and the patterns of online communication and social interaction, expression, and identity formation that are produced within this digital social space, as well as how they are sustained by the resources available within the online setting.

In this sense, online activity is conceived as different and even separate from one's offline activity, having a life of its own, usually separated from real life as a parallel reality of the participating individuals. When studied independently, the virtual space is a coherent social space that exists entirely within a computer space, nd in which new rules and ways of being can emerge.

Thus, youth operating within an online The internet is often used to community may be geographically dispersed, experiencing express unexplored aspects different hours of the day in different locales, but they share an identical interest, virtual space and rules, shared activities, of the self and to create a and a common sense of belonging. Being online not only virtual persona. detaches individuals from the constraints imposed by location, but also frees them from the constraints associated with their offline personalities and ocial roles.

Youth have an opportunity to express online their " real" or inner selves, using the relative anonymity of the internet to be the person they want to be

and experimenting with their identity and self. 8 The internet is often used to express unexplored aspects of the self and to create a virtual persona. Cyberspace becomes a place to " act out" unresolved conflicts, to play and replay difficulties, to work on significant personal issues. Sherry Turkle summarizes this position: " We can use the virtual to reflect constructively on the real. Cyberspace opens the possibility for dentity play, but it is very serious play. 9 This approach has methodological implications. Conceiving of the internet as an object of study means studying only the virtual persona; online communication; and online social norms, rules, and etiquettes, without considering the other direction, namely how established social norms and values are being reflected in the online world. The internet has been hailed for the possibilities it is perceived to offer its users of escaping the constraints of their material surroundings and bodies, enabling them to create and play with online identities. In these terms, the human body is regarded not only as invisible online, but also as temporarily suspended, so that it becomes partially or completely irrelevant. Similarly, in this perspective, internet communication creates new forms of social relationships, in which participants are no longer bound by the 7 Christine Hine, " Internet Research and the Sociology of Cyber-social-Scientific Knowledge," The Information Society 21 (September 2005): 239-48. 8 John A. Bargh Psychology 55 (2004): 573-90. 9 Sherry Turkle, " Cyberspace and Identity," Contemporary Sociology 28: 6 (1999): 643-8. 0 Sadie Plant, " On the Matrix: Cyberfeminism Simulations," Cultures of the Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies, ed. Rob Shields (London: Sage, 1996) 170-83. 54 need to meet others face to face but can expand their social arena by meeting others, located anywhere in the online universe, mind to

mind. Thus, virtual relationships are seen as more intimate, richer, and more liberating than offline relationships because they are based on genuine mutual interest rather than the coincidence of physical proximity.

It is a zone of freedom, fluidity, and experimentation insulated from the mundane realities of the material world. 1 An alternative view is to see the internet as a cultural artifact, an object immersed in a social context, considering how the technology is incorporated in the everyday life of individuals and how it is used as a means of communication, expression, and content production within an offline social world. 12 This perspective rejects the dematerialization of social life that results from adopting a perspective that looks at the internet as a culture in itself.

Much of what happens in electronic space is deeply inflected by the offline culture" the material practices and imaginaries that take place outside the electronic space. Digital Conceiving of the new digital spaces are not exclusive conditions that stand outside space as socially embedded the nondigital. Digital space is embedded in the larger societal, cultural, subjective, economic, and imaginary allows us to go beyond the constructions of lived experience and the systems within duality between technological which we exist and operate. 3 Conceiving of the new digital space as socially determinism and the social embedded allows us to go beyond the duality between construction of technology. technological determinism and the social construction of technology. For example, this approach allows us to understand that adolescents use the internet for the creation of unique social spaces in which they can use instant messaging and social networking sites to sustain their friendships, but they can also

overcome the geographical limitations of association. They can access others who share their concerns and interests and do not belong to their immediate social group.

In doing this, they are accessing new social networks and novel information resources and opportunities. Social disadvantage creates restrictions in access to networks and to the resources that the internet might offer. At the same time, as studies have shown, most of the use of Instant Messenger (IM) and social networking sites is to maintain existing social ties with similar others. The view of the internet as a cultural tool calls attention to the material sources of social life, as socio-economic status limits access, skills, and participation in the virtual world.

Thus, the internet is seen not as generating a new online world but as mostly 11 See Bargh and 12 James E. Katz Interaction on the Net," The Internet in Everyday Life, ed. Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) 114-38. 3 See Sassen 365-88; Susan C. Herring, " Questioning the Generational Divide: Technological Exoticism and Adult Constructions of Online Youth Identity," Youth, Identity, and Digital Media, ed. David Buckingham, The John D. and Catherine T.

MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007) 71-92. 55 reflecting the existing conditions of society; individuals use the internet to do old things in new ways, expanding the possibilities of communication among individuals who know each other and are linked by friendship, kinship, or other types of relationship. The internet is recognized as a new channel of communication, but its function is limited

to supplementing the existing ones (face-to-face interaction and phone calls) and in some cases displacing them. 4 Most fundamentally, existing characteristics of relationships are instrumental and central in determining which channels to use and when. Strong ties communicate using all the channels; weak ties use only some of them. 15 The emphasis in this view is on the actor; the integration of the internet into existing relationships reflects the actor's rational choices in maintaining existing social ties. In the same vein, the conception of an internet generation has been rejected as a mere expansion of an adult discourse that reflects the difficulties and fears of adults to achieve digital literacy.

Youth have incorporated IM, blogs, information search, and commerce into their lives, using them as additional technological tools to conduct the same activities that youth have always carried on. 16 The integration of the internet in the everyday life of youth means that both views need to be integrated. Rather than expecting causation, we need to be tuned to the mutual influences. Adolescents use the internet to accomplish important developmental tasks such as identity formation, social interaction, and the development of autonomy.

The internet is being used to conduct these developmental tasks, and, at the same time, through its use, it is having an effect on their culture that in certain dimensions looks different than that of the previous generation. When looking at the internet culture, one important development is a shift in the association between youth and media. Youth today are active participants in the creation of media content. The advent of Web 2. increases

the ability of youth not only to be passive consumers of information and content online, but also to become active creators and contributors.

The lower costs of coordinating creative efforts and distributing materials allow individuals to generate their own content and to collaborate with others in social, economic, and political activities. Social media platforms facilitate various adhoc and formal, small as well as large-scale online communities, where User-Generatedcontent (UGC) flourishes: bloggers post news and analysis, independent musicians distribute their music (Myspace), and amateur outh today are actively involved in web production and tend to appropriate portions of it and to convert them into youth zones.

Teens also produce unique, stand-alone content for the web, such as blogs, that allow for a more interactive dialog. Blogs represent a kind of diary that is shared with a larger audience that refers to the details of their everyday life (daily concerns, thoughts, 14 Nancy K. Baym, Yan Bing Zhang, and Mel-Chen Lin, " Social Interactions across Media: Interpersonal Communication on the Internet, Telephone and Face-to-Face," New Media & Society 6: 3 (2004): 299-318. 5 Caroline Haythornthwaite, " Strong, Weak and Latent Ties and the Impact of New Media," The Information Society 18: 5 (2002): 385-401. 16 see Herring 71-92. 56 and emotions), consumer talk, and television and movie critiques. As such, blogs are a popular way to build identity and socialize in an information-based society. Yet, as I have mentioned before, it would be a mistake to think that all youth are engaged in content production and share the same digital culture.

For the large majority of adolescents, the internet is being used mostly for another important developmental task: relationship formation and maintenance with their existing friends. Adolescence is an important developmenFor the large majority of tal stage. During this period social relationships outside adolescents, the internet is the family expand, and their quality has been linked to various behavioral outcomes.

Social interaction with peers being used mostly for another provides a forum for learning and refining socio-emotionimportant developmental al skills needed for enduring relationships. Through intertask: relationship formation actions with peers, adolescents learn how to cooperate, to take different perspectives, and to satisfy growing needs and maintenance with their for intimacy. 7 In the last ten years, the communication existing friends. environment of youth has changed as more and more teens have access to computer-mediated communication and cellular phones.

The most frequent youth use of the internet remains for social purposes, as 93 percent send and receive emails, 68 percent send and receive instant messages, and 55 percent have a profile in a social networking site. Only 28 percent create or work in an online journal (blog), and 18 percent visit chat rooms. 18 Youth social life is conducted both online and offline, and their overlap is leading to perpetual communication with peers. When coming home from school, youth continue to be in contact with their school and remote friends through IM and social networking sites.

This continuous contact provides a sense of copresence, of being together with others in a mediated " either remote or virtual" environment.

Conversations that started at school continue after school through mediated connections of IM, emails, and social IM communicators usually know each other and often share experiences, the nature of their conversations is reported to be much like those they have in the face-toface space: reflections on their days events, gossip about others, including what clothes ere worn and who was seen with whom.

IM is often used as an efficient channel to enable multiple social network members to coordinate face-to-face meetings. In this respect, an interesting behavior is micro-coordination. A new but fast growing communication channel is short message service (SMS). SMS is used for " micro-coordination," a concept that refers to the instrumental use of IM and mobile phones to coordinate a meeting by allowing individuals to adjust and readjust in real time the time and place 17 Kenneth H. Rubin, William M. Bukowski, and Jeffrey G.

Parker, " Peer Interactions, Relationships, nd Groups," Handbook of Child Psychology: Social, Emotional, and Personality Development, ed. Nancy Eisenberg (New York: Wiley, 2006) 571-645. 18 Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden, " Teens, Privacy & Online Social Networks: Managing Online Identities and Personal Information in the Age of Myspace," Pew Internet & American Life Project (18 April 2007): . 57 of meeting. 19 Rather than setting a fixed time and place, youth converge in real time to a common location.

Social networking sites have additional features; they allow users to present information about themselves (such as age, gender, location, ducation, and interests); encourage users to link to known and likeminded others whose

profiles exist in the site or to invite known and likeminded individuals to Join the site; and enable users to establish and maintain contact with other users, to post content, create personal blogs, and participate in online groups.

Besides the communication element, social network sites are sites for identity formation and experimentation. Most sites encourage users to construct accurate representations of themselves, but it is difficult to know to what extent individuals do so. The use of ifferent social media to stay in contact all the time with peers has raised the question of how youth accommodate online participation with their busy schedules. With the extensive use of computers, multitasking has become part of the way teens manage a busy life.

Media multitasking can be defined as engaging in more than one media activity at a time, switching constantly between such activities as email, IM, web search, and sending text mesWith the extensive use of sages to friends. 20 In other words, teens are switching back computers, multitasking has and forth between different activities. It is true that some multitasking existed in the past, with adolescents doing become part of the way teens homework and listening to music at the same time, but manage a busy life. now it has been expanded from media to members of the peer group.

In a comprehensive study on multitasking in the U. S. , when youth were asked how often they use other media when using each of four media (reading newspapers, watching TV, using computers, and playing video games), it was found that about a quarter are multitasking most of the time, about half from time to time, and only 20 percent of the teens never

multitask. From this reliminary study, it is clear that multitasking results from computer use. One central finding of the study was that multitasking is not common when the primary media being used is television.

On the other hand, multitasking is very common when using the computer. When using email, 83 percent of the respondents reported simultaneously engaging in other media activity. When using IM, 75 percent reported doing this activity simultaneously with other media consumption. It is not surprising that when using the computer for any purpose, youth report simultaneously engaging in other computer-related activities. For example, when the computer is sed for computer games, it is very likely that it is also being used for IM and phone conversations.

When the computer is used 19 Richard Ling and Birgitte Yttri, " Hyper-coordination Via Mobile Phone in Norway," Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance, ed. James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 139-69. 20 Ulla G. Foehr, Media Multitasking Among American Youth: Prevalence, Predictors and Pairings (Menlo Park: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006). 58 for IM, it is very likely to be used simultaneously to search websites, watch television, nd send email.

Finally, when searching for websites, the most popular secondary activity is conducting IM conversations. 21 What are the outcomes of perpetual contact, micro-coordination, and multitasking? These activities might create an image of youth who are socially overloaded, managing hundreds of contacts, and exposing themselves to the risks of contact with strangers.

This image seems to be different from the behavior and views that teens report. Users are able to build a network The internet plays an of connections that they can display as a list of friends. mportant ole in adolescent These friends may be offline actual friends or acquaintances, or people they only know or have met online, life as a cultural artifact and a and with whom they have no other link. A study in the culture in itself. U. S. found that 91 percent of all social networking teens say they use the sites to stay in touch with friends they see frequently, while 82 percent use the site to stay in touch with friends they rarely see in person, and 72 percent use the sites to make plans with their friends. 2 In the U. K. the findings are similar, and while users reported massive umbers of individuals as " friends," the actual number of close friends is allowed contact with hundreds of acquaintances, people tend to have around 5 close friends, and 90 percent of their contacts were people they had met face to face. Only 10 percent were contacts made with total strangers. 23 Social networking sites facilitate youth to update others about their activities and whereabouts, part of the culture of perpetual contact.

Youth report that the number of individuals in their contact list is important because it is often used as an indication of social standing, the extent of being socially involved with others. 4 The internet plays an important role in adolescent life as a cultural artifact and a culture in itself. It is important to recognize that adolescence is a developmental stage with some common characteristics and at the same time a socially nonhomogeneous group of individuals who adopt different components of the internet for different purposes.

Rather than thinking of the internet in dichotomist terms, either reflecting social values and norms or generating a Net-generation, it is useful to think of constant interrelations that are being created, bridging and mutually affecting online and offline youth lives. Youth adoption of the internet presents opportunities for participation in the information society. The most frequent use of the internet is for conducting social contact with family, friends, and acquaintances.

For some adolescents, belonging to a peer group and participating in social activities are dependent on access. The social partici- 21 See Foehr. 22 See Lenhart and Madden. 23 James Randerson, " Social Networking Sites Don't Deepen Friendships," The Guardian (10 September 2007): . 24 Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe, " The Benefits of Facebook ' Friends:' Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites," Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 12: 4 (2007): . 9 pation of adolescents is shaped both by their developmental need for social association and the technological features of the internet. The need for social association explains why the majority of the contacts in Social Network Sites and IM are with friends from school. The features of the internet support the intensification of youth social life that is expressed in perpetual contact. The need to manage this perpetual contact leads to media and social multitasking" strategies that are needed o cope with perpetual contact with one's peer group.

A smaller group of adolescents are active participants in the production of web content and digital culture. Rejecting parental conceptions of privacy, youth are using commercial and noncommercial sites to express to a large

and often unknown audience their identities, artistic creations, and everyday experiences. The expression of identity is a developmental need that is expressed in a digital space. Here again, the social meets technology and in this unique encounter creates a change in our conception of private and public