Teenagers and technology: 'I'd rather give up my kidney than my phone'

Text, text, text, that's all they think about: but are all those hours on the phone and Facebook turning teenagers into screen-enslaved social inadequates? Jon Henley finds out

"I'd rather," deadpans Philippa Grogan, 16, "give up, like, a kidney than my phone. How did you manage before? Carrier pigeons? Letters? Going round each others' houses on BIKES?" Cameron Kirk, 14, reckons he spends "an hour, hour-and-a-half on school days" hanging out with his 450-odd Facebook friends; maybe twice that at weekends. "It's actually very practical if you forget what that day's homework is. Unfortunately, one of my best friends doesn't have Facebook. But it's OK; we talk on our PlayStations."

Emily Hooley, 16, recalls a Very Dark Moment: "We went to Wales for a week at half term to revise. There was no mobile, no TV, no broadband. We had to drive into town just to get a signal. It was really hard, knowing people were texting you, writing on your Wall, and you couldn't respond. Loads of my friends said they'd just never do that."

Teens, eh? Not how they were when I was young. Nor the way they talk to each other. Let's frighten ourselves, first: for a decade, the Pew Internet & American Life Project has been the world's largest and most authoritative provider of data on the internet's impact on the lives of 21st-century citizens. Since 2007, it has been chronicling the use teenagers make of the net, in particular their mass adoption of social networking sites. It has been studying the way teens use mobile phones, including text messages, since 2006.
This is what the Project says about the way US teens (and, by extension, teenagers in much of western Europe: the exact figures may sometimes differ by a percentage point or two, but the patterns are the same) communicate in an age of Facebook Chat, instant messaging and unlimited texts. Ready?

First, 75% of all teenagers (and 58% of 12-year-olds) now have a mobile phone. Almost 90% of phone-owning teens send and receive texts, most of them daily. Half send 50 or more texts a day; one in three send 100. In fact, in barely four years, texting has established itself as comfortably "the preferred channel of basic communication between teens and their friends".

But phones do more than simply text, of course. More than 80% of phone-owning teens also use them to take pictures (and 64% to share those pictures with others). Sixty per cent listen to music on them, 46% play games, 32% swap videos and 23% access social networking sites. The mobile phone, in short, is now "the favoured communication hub for the majority of teens".

As if texting, swapping, hanging and generally spending their waking hours welded to their phones wasn't enough, 73% use social networking sites, mostly Facebook – 50% more than three years ago. Digital communication is not just prevalent in teenagers' lives. It IS teenagers' lives.

There's a very straightforward reason, says Amanda Lenhart, a Pew senior research specialist. "Simply, these technologies meet teens' developmental needs," she says. "Mobile phones and social networking sites make the things teens have always done – defining their own identity, establishing themselves as independent of their parents, looking cool, impressing members of the opposite sex – a whole lot easier."

Flirting, boasting, gossiping, teasing, hanging out, confessing: all that classic teen stuff has always happened, Lenhart says. It's just that it used to happen behind the bike sheds, or via tightly folded notes pressed urgently into sweating hands in the corridor between lessons. Social networking sites and mobile phones have simply facilitated the whole business, a gadsillion times over.

For Professor Patti Valkenburg, of the University of Amsterdam's internationally respected Centre for Research on Children, Adolescents and the Media, "contemporary communications tools" help resolve one of the fundamental conflicts that rages within every adolescent. Adolescence, she says, is characterised by "an enhanced need for self-presentation, or communicating your identity to others, and also self-disclosure – discussing intimate topics. Both are essential in developing teenagers' identities, allowing them to validate their opinions and determine the appropriateness of their attitudes and behaviours."

But, as we all recall, adolescence is also a period of excruciating shyness and aching self-consciousness – which can make all that self-presentation and self-disclosure something of a perilous, not to say agonising, business. So the big plus of texting, instant messaging and social networking is that it allows the crucial identity-establishing behaviour, without the accompanying embarrassment. "These technologies give their users a sense of increased controllability," Valkenburg says. "That, in turn, allows them to feel secure about their communication, and thus freer in their interpersonal relations."
"Controllability", she explains, is about three things: being able to say what you want without fear of the message not getting through because of that humongous spot on your chin or your tendency to blush; having the power to reflect on and change what you write before you send it (in contrast to face-to-face communication); and being able to stay in touch with untold hordes of friends at times, and in places, where your predecessors were essentially incommunicado.

But what do teenagers make of this newfound freedom to communicate? Philippa reckons she sends "probably about 30" text messages every day, and receives as many. "They're about meeting up – where are you, see you in 10, that kind of thing," she says. "There's an awful lot of flirting goes on, of course. Or it's, 'OMG, what's biology homework?'. And, I'm babysitting and I'm SOOOO bored." (Boredom appears to be the key factor in the initiation of many teen communications.)

Like most of her peers, Philippa wouldn't dream of using her phone to actually phone anyone, except perhaps her parents – to placate them if she's not where she should be, or ask them to come and pick her up if she is. Calls are expensive, and you can't make them in class (you shouldn't text in class either, but "lots of people do").

Philippa also has 639 Facebook friends, and claims to know "the vast majority" (though some, she admits, are "quite far down the food chain"). "I don't want to be big-headed or anything, but I am quite popular," she says. "Only because I don't have a social life outside my bedroom, though." When I call her, 129 of her friends are online.

Facebook rush-hour is straight after school, and around nine or 10 in the evening. "You can have about 10 chats open at a time, then it gets a bit slow and you have to start deleting people," Philippa says. The topics? "General banter, light-hearted abuse. Lots of talk about parties and about photos of parties." Cred-wise, it's important to have a good, active Facebook profile: lots of updates, lots of photos of you tagged.

Sometimes, though, it ends in tears. Everyone has witnessed cyber-bullying, but the worst thing that happened to Philippa was when someone posted "a really dreadful picture of me, with an awful double chin", then refused to take it down. "She kept saying, 'No way, it's upped my profile views 400%,'" says Philippa. It's quite easy, she thinks, for people to feel "belittled, isolated" on Facebook.

There are other downsides. Following huge recent publicity, teens are increasingly aware of the dangers of online predators. "Privacy's a real issue," says Emily. "I get 'friend' requests from people I don't know and have never heard of; I ignore them. I have a private profile. I'm very careful about that."

A 2009 survey found up to 45% of US companies are now checking job applicants' activity on social networking sites, and 35% reported rejecting people because of what they found. Universities and colleges, similarly, are starting to look online. "You need to be careful," says Cameron Kirk, astute and aware even at 14. "Stuff can very easily get misunderstood." Emily agrees, but adds: "Personally, I love the idea that it's up there for ever. It'll be lovely to go back, later, and see all those emotions and relations."

Pew's Lenhart says research [by Danah Boyd of Microsoft Research] has revealed a class distinction in many teens' attitudes to online privacy. "Teens from college-focused, upper-
middle-class families tend to be much more aware of their online profiles, what they say about them, future consequences for jobs and education," she says. "With others, there's a tendency to share as much as they can, because that's their chance for fame, their possibility of a ticket out."

The question that concerns most parents, though, is whether such an unprecedented, near-immeasurable surge in non face-to-face communication is somehow changing our teenagers – diminishing their ability to conduct more traditional relationships, turning them into screen-enslaved, socially challenged adults. Yet teens, on the whole, seem pretty sensible about this. Callum O'Connor, 16, says there's a big difference between chatting online and face to face. "Face to face is so much clearer," he says. "Facebook and instant messaging are such detached forms of communication. It's so easy to be misinterpreted, or to misinterpret what someone says. It's terribly easy to say really horrible things. I'm permanently worrying – will this seem heartless, how many kisses should I add, can I say that?"

He's certain that what goes on online "isn't completely real. Some people clearly think it is, but I feel the difference. It's really not the same." Emily agrees: "It's weird. If I have a massive fight on Facebook, it's always, like, the next day, did it actually matter? Was it important? I always go up to the person afterwards and talk to them face to face, to see their emotions and their expressions. Otherwise you never know. It's complicated."

Emily is fairly confident that social networking and texting aren't changing who she is. "I'm the same online and in person. All this is an extension to real life, not a replacement." Olivia Stamp, 16 and equally self-aware, says she thinks social networking actually helps her to be more herself. "I think of myself as quite a shy person," she says. "So it's actually easier to be myself on Facebook because you can edit what you want to say, take your time; you don't feel awkward. I definitely feel more confident online – more like the self I know I really am, beneath the shyness."

These new communications technologies, Olivia says, are "an enhancement, an enrichment actually. They bring people even closer, in fact, without replacing anything. We're not socially abnormal. Look at us!" And the experts seem to back that up. Valkenburg says: "Our research gives no reason at present for concern about the social consequences of online communication – but it's early days. What if the constant self-confirmation teens experience online turns into excessive self-esteem, or narcissism? We don't know yet."

Lenhart puts it another way. "Our research shows face-to-face time between teenagers hasn't changed over the past five years. Technology has simply added another layer on top. Yes, you can find studies that suggest online networking can be bad for you. But there are just as many that show the opposite."

We should, she suggests, "Step back. The telephone, the car, the television – they all, in their time, changed the way teens relate to each other, and to other people, quite radically. And how did their parents respond? With the same kind of wailing and gnashing of teeth we're doing now. These technologies change lives, absolutely. But it's a generational thing."

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