

Technology

Browse and get smarter

Recent study reports that Internet use is good for teens' health

|By Joseph Wilson

The most important news is often buried at the back of the newspaper. Last month, when researchers released the results of a massive three-year study by the MacArthur Foundation, you didn't hear much about it.

That's because the researchers found that using digital technology is integral to the development of healthy, smart and socially adept teenagers.

Traditional news outlets prefer to cast technology as a force for corruption and alienation. News swirled around a particularly heinous case of online bullying in Missouri that led to a suicide. Another suicide was broadcast live on the "life-casting" site Justin.tv, where a troubled Florida man faded away after downing a bottle of opiates.

Salvadore Hernandez, the assistant FBI agent in charge of the bullying case, was quoted as saying, "The Internet is a world unto itself," and in his ruling the judge said, "If you have children on the Internet and you are not watching what they're doing, you'd better be."

This is the same Internet the MacArthur Foundation report says is "creating new opportunities for youth to grapple with social norms, explore interests, develop technical skills and experiment with new forms of self-expression."

They enumerate the myriad ways that interacting with digital technology serves to strengthen social bonds between teenagers and develop their own sense of identity.

The MacArthur report was the biggest study of youth media use in U.S. history. The researchers, based in Berkeley, took an ethnographic approach and spent \$50 million interviewing over 800 youths about their interaction with digital media. They spent 5,000 hours observing teen behaviour online, delving into online gaming, uses of social networks and the prevalence of personal gadgets like iPods.

Many parents think the amount of time kids spend in front of their computer screens or gazing into their cellphones, is a "waste of time." The researchers allude to this in the title of the free online book that summarizes their findings, *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out: Living And Learning With New Media* (digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/report).

Such idle explorations of technology, the authors argue, are far from being a waste of time and instead encourage literacy in new forms of media and ready kids for a workplace that is becoming more and more dependent on digital technology. This kind of "self-directed" learning is far more effective than anything they get in schools.

The simple act of creating a MySpace page, complete with a customized background and personalized plug-ins, hones kids' creativity and computer programming abilities. The end product is then subject to peer review by the kid's online community, which includes friends made through social networking sites or shared online interests in, say, the NHL or the new Akon album.

This fact doesn't stop parents from worrying about the amount of time their kids spend online, a fear exacerbated by news reports that implicitly blame technology for tragic events like a young person's suicide.

But reports like this say more about the sublimated fears of our society than they do about how technology affects people.

This kind of projection often happens with new technology. Look at how quickly television has been forgotten as the root of all evil. Neil Postman's anti-TV screed, *Amusing Ourselves To Death*, seems rather quaint in light of the current teeth-gnashing over the solipsistic vices of blogs, podcasts and text-messaging.

New technology is cast as something that isolates rather than engages. Books were blamed for being isolationist, too, back in Gutenberg's day.

So what's next? Whatever the new gadget of the day, you can be sure the media will blame it for corrupting youth. Naturally, studies will follow showing that teenagers are creative and resilient in their use of this technology.

The good news will probably get buried, though. It's not nearly sensational enough.

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