

Contact Lists and Youth

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This paper explores the nature of networked contact lists in an emerging new media ecology as they relate to a population of 10 American pre-teens and teens (9-15). Mobile, gaming, and Web 2.0 services are contributing to a shift in the role of the contact list from a static visualization of a database to an active communication tool and the site of sociality. We draw in material from ethnographic research illustrating contact lists as dynamic sites for social activity, existing across multiple media channels, which evolve in time with an individual user. We then describe how contact list use by American youth (9 - 15) produces new understandings of accessibility, sociality, and visibility within the scope of personal relationships, mobility, and play in everyday life. We conclude with how we are informing corporate strategy on youth marketing and new product development.

Introduction: School, The Center Of The World

American youth are members of a generation born into a new media ecology where contact lists are crucial components of the everyday media experience. Participants (9-15) in our study frequently used contact lists in an effort to manage personal relationships across social, temporal, geographical, and technological domains. A significant consequence of contact list use by pre-teens and teens is the development of new paradigms for social interaction that contest current norms. We will show how participants in our study optimized their online and offline social relationships through a novel and resourceful use of contact lists.

School and extra curricular activities are serious time commitments occurring throughout the school week and weekends. School, public or private, is a unique environment that wields incredible influence over the makeup of youth social networks; school is a closed community that regularly introduces known and unknown peers from a general population to each other through a series of regular reorganization of class, grade, and extra curricular rosters. Participants in our study frequently described a relationship between encountering new peers and their use of contact lists to manage relationships. Participants stated that not sharing a class with someone, despite attending the same school and being in the same grade as each other, is a significant barrier that renders pre-teens and teens socially invisible to each other.

In addition to pre-teen and teen busyness, youth have restricted independent mobility. Our participants had few opportunities to freely move about geography without the consent of an adult. Danah Boyd (2007) suggests that the Internet is unique because “it allows teens to participate in unregulated publics while located in adult-regulated physical spaces such as homes and schools.” We will describe how youth use contact lists to work around mobility limitations.

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Study

This exploratory study features 10 children (6 boys, 4 girls) from 5 middle class households of 2 children each located in the Portland, Oregon region, with a minimum of 2 visits per child. All of the homes we visited had media environments featuring a range of screens and services that make up our contemporary media ecology including: television screens, cable television, DVD players, multiple video game consoles, PCs, laptops, mobile phones, and Internet access. Violent video games were not permitted in any of the homes, although several parents allowed their children to watch PG-13 and R rated films when supervised by an adult. Methods included interviews, guided demonstrations of media environments, and design exercises.

Mostly Text

Communication technologies present in the homes we visited varied; half of our participants owned a mobile phone, all participants owned networked console and handheld gaming platforms (Nintendo DS, Nintendo Wii, Xbox 360); all participants had access to the Internet through a family computer where they maintained personal email and instant messaging accounts (Lenhart, A., Madden, M., Hilton, P., 2005. Family PCs functioned as the central site for digital communication and homework; PCs enabled multi-tasking: homework in one window, an instant message client in the other - to hangout or work on an assignment together. Participants also reported that when they were bored or had nothing to do, they would instant message or text message “random stuff” to friends.

Participants unanimously agreed email was used to facilitate communication with older people (aunts, uncles, teachers) while instant messaging and text messaging (when available) were preferred technologies between peers.

Instant messaging has become the digital communication backbone of teens' daily lives. About half of instant-messaging teens – or roughly 32% of all teens – use IM every single day. As the platforms for instant messaging programs spread to cell phones and handheld devices, teens are starting to take textual communication with them into their busy and increasingly mobile lives. IM is a staple of teens' daily Internet diet and is used for a wide array of tasks – to make plans with friends, talk about homework assignments, joke around, check in with parents...(Lenhart, A., Madden, M., Hilton, P., 2005)

Instant message, mobile, and social network application contact lists belonging to our participants reflected populations of mixed contacts with various degrees of social visibility aggregated together in single, domain-specific lists. These technologies afforded participants a wide range of flexibility with regards to content, mobility, and time.

Patricia Lange (2007) states “a media circuit is not a social network itself, but rather it supports social networks by facilitating and technically mediating social interactions among people within a network.” Pre-teens and teens create media circuits when they use PC, mobile, web, and gaming technologies to manage relationships. We will describe how youth are using contact lists in novel ways to negotiate online and offline social visibility.

Circle of Friends: BFF, BF, F

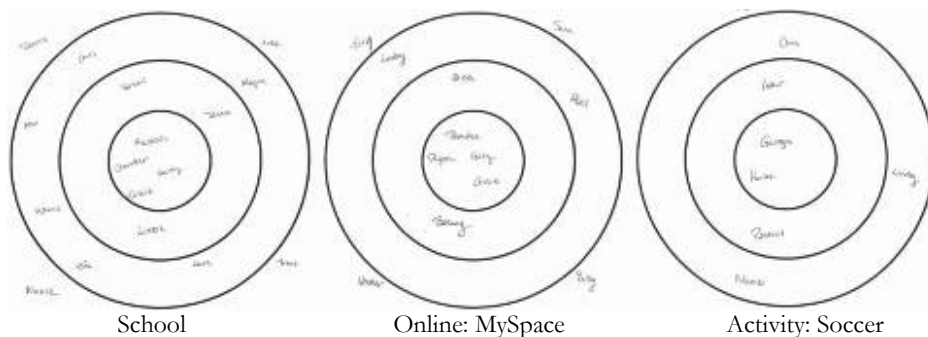


Figure 1 *Circle of Friends Exercise (Kathi, 15).*

Circle of Friends is a design exercise that visualizes each participant’s social network across three important social spaces: School, where youth spend most of the day in a community of peers; An Online space of their choice; and Activity, a novel interest or specialty group each participant is affiliated with (soccer, swim, band). Each participant was asked to map their social network, relative to the social space, onto three concentric circles while imagining themselves at the center of the inner circle and label their closest friends in the center, friends not as close in the middle ring, and friends socially distant in the third ring. Maps were marked independently of each other. Following the completion of each map, we asked participants to articulate the relationships they marked on the chart

Upon completion of the Circle of Friends exercise we had three maps and testimonial evidence that provided us with opportunities to ask questions about each participant’s relationships to their friends, the influence of location and environment on friendships, and technology use.

The Classroom

Participants in this study identified the school classroom as having significant impact on their social relationships. Classroom environments varied between our younger (K-6) and older (Senior High School) participants. K-6 is organized by grades and subdivided into classes with a student being assigned to a class for an entire academic year. Senior high

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school is organized by year and then by subject, with each class composed of a mix of students, some including mix of students from different years.

Richard (11) describes the impact of classmates and the organization of a class on a his social network with an anecdote, “if Jeffery and I were not in the same class I’d think we would still be enemies this year. So, that [being in the same class] really helped us. This year I was disappointed to find out I didn’t have any friends in my class that I already knew.”

Although Richard and Jeffery are in the same grade, prior to the 2007-2008 academic year, they never shared a class together, resulting in limited social visibility and “enemy” status. Richard and Jeffery were not actual enemies; both boys were relative unknowns to each other until they were assigned the same class and became friends.

Conversations with our participants suggest that youth online and offline social networks are built on face-to-face interaction amongst peers in a classroom environment. School and extra curricular programs make up the core community of peers youth regularly interact with.

Drifting: Managing Social Visibility

Classroom seating assignments, class schedules, and extra curricular activities organize youth into temporary social clusters that place students in immediate contact with each other. Organizing and reorganizing students has a profound impact on their social network; some relationships last only for the duration of a class or sports season, while others will continue to develop beyond a specific class or sport season. In addition to social networks being used to manage current friends (Lenhart, A., Madden, M., 2007), some behavior from our participants suggest social networks may also be used to develop new relationships.

Kathi (15) echoes Richard’s previous anecdote regarding the impact of classrooms on friendship as she describes four friends located in the outer ring of her school map (figure 1), “people I’ve only really gotten to know kinda this year, and already I’m not very, I was like close to them, like the beginning of the year, but now I don’t have any classes with any of them really, so they’re like drifting.” Although no longer together in the same class with the classmates she identified as drifters, Kathi maintains her relationships with them through limited MySpace messaging, “talking with them occasionally...[they are] not forgotten, but not there completely.” Absent from the immediacy of everyday face to face contact does not render a person invisible online.

Individuals located outside of the third circle of Kathi’s school map (figure 1), in the ether of friendship, do necessarily represent individuals who drifted or are currently drifting *away* from Kathi; she used the margins to mark social status progressing from invisible to visible. Kathi describes some of the kids she met in new classes who are currently occupying this space; “the four [friends] outside of the circle should be in the [center] circle but they’re not there yet because I have not really gotten to know them yet; they’re people that I’ve met

in the past couple of weeks that are probably going to come closer in the circle but are not there yet.” Kathi’s description of drifting identifies visibility and invisibility as dynamic states.

Steve (12) answers “only a few”, when asked how many friends from his instant message list of 120+ contacts he regularly messages. Instant messaging, unlike Facebook, MySpace, or similar platforms, does not have a public face; contacts are only visible on a local terminal and have no platform for public display. We believe not all pre-teens and teens are amassing large collections of email, instant message, mobile, and social network contacts for bragging rights; rather, they retain contacts to manage degrees of visibility as peers drift in and out of relationships.

Random Content: From Invisible to Visible

“Informal conversation creates affinity through greetings, jokes, gossip, polite inquiries, and ‘chatter’ of low substantive content” (Nardi, 2005). Steven describes instant message exchanges with weak ties from his school and swimming club, “you don’t talk to people you don’t know that well, you don’t get into a detailed conversation with them, you kinda go ‘hey, what’s up?’ then they like say, ‘oh cool’; its totally random stuff, not anything that’s absolutely important.”

Bonnie Nardi (2005) argues that low-content informal instant messages and mobile messages are exchanged to renew bonds rather than develop new ones. Youth in our study use these exchanges to negotiate early stages of friendships, if a relationship is established, the role of instant messaging and mobile messaging shifts from relationship creation to renewal.



Figure 2. Screen image of Kim displaying “random stuff”.

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Social visibility often begins with face-to-face interaction through a classroom assignment, extra curricular activity, or a mutual friend. If initial social contact is made online, it is usually at the suggestion of a mutual friend. Introductions are followed by *random* short online exchanges. “Random”, in the context of our participants’ descriptions, is a synonym for low-content exchanges. Random, seemingly un-important chatter is part of the social process used to incrementally make visible otherwise invisible social connections.

Once a relationship is established, random online chatter becomes part of hanging out. “Can you help me not get bored?” asks Kim (9). “I chat about random stuff sometimes when it is with [scrolls down a chat session and points to names of friends] and we talk, we have TFKs, its homework, so we talk about it and we help each other out. This is random stuff [scrolling down a long chat that was on/off for a period of an hour].” (figure 2)

Activity (of Choice)

Circle of Friend’s Activity map describes an interest unique to each participant. All of our participants identified activities located outside the bounds of their school’s environment: competitive swimming, soccer, tennis, School of Rock, etc. These activities may extended individual mobility beyond local boundaries and introduce participants to new peers with a shared interest in a particular activity. Kathi traveled to California for a soccer tournament, Steve and his brother traveled within Oregon to participate in a competitive swim league. Most contacts from this category stay within the domain of the activity, we saw few contacts appearing on both the Activity map and Online map. Contacts from an extra curricular activity that were entered into instant message and mobile contact lists enabled participants to aggregate relationships distributed across multiple social and physical geographies together as a single *visual* group of friends.

Networked Games

All but one of our participants expressed an interest in networked console and PC video games. Tony (15) uses Halo 3 (Xbox 360, Xbox Live) as his preferred method of networked social interaction. Tony is a busy teen; he does well in school and is a competitive tennis player who practices tennis up to five days a week. Tony is mentally and physically exhausted following a full day of school, tennis, and homework, leaving him with little interest in instant messaging or hanging around MySpace as many of his friends do. Tony and his gaming buddies (all fiends from school) meet up in the world of Halo 3, their avatars appearing together in a single virtual world, tethering the geographically remote friends together though a shared private audio channel, where they hang out and talk as they casually shoot aliens.

Halo 3 provides a graphically rich shared social space for Tony and his friends to hangout together when they are unable to meet in-person due to their limited mobility. Although text based communication technologies are not as aesthetically pleasing as a 3D game worlds, contact lists and messaging tools also provide a channel for pre-teens and

teens to be accessible and visible to each other almost anywhere and anytime. Tony was the only participant to use a gaming platform as his primary chat channel, we think this example is important because it points to the rapid proliferation of contact lists into new spaces in our media ecology.

CONCLUSION

This paper described how a group of American pre-teens and teens used networked contact lists in novel ways to negotiate online and offline visibility. Circle of Friends was an important method for us to gain insight on the relationship between the classroom environment and youth online/offline interaction. Industry intent on targeting the youth market will need to understand that youth exist in a unique social space that informs their use of instant messaging, text messaging, and other contact list based communication technologies.

NOTE

This was part of an exploratory study conducted by Ken Anderson, Maria Bezaitis, and Matthew Yapchaian at Intel Research Portland, Oregon.

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