Some youth rethink online communications

By MARTHA IRVINE, AP National Writer
2 hours, 14 minutes ago

CHICAGO - For some, it would be unthinkable — certain social suicide. But Gabe Henderson is finding freedom in a recent decision: He canceled his MySpace account.

No longer enthralled with the world of social networking, the 26-year-old graduate student pulled the plug after realizing that a lot of the online friends he accumulated were really just acquaintances. He's also phasing out his profile on Facebook, a popular social networking site that, like others, allows users to create profiles, swap message and share photos — all with the goal of expanding their circle of online friends.

"The superficial emptiness clouded the excitement I had once felt," Henderson wrote in a column in the student newspaper at Iowa State University, where he studies history. "It seems we have lost, to some degree, that special depth that true friendship entails."

Across campus, journalism professor Michael Bugeja — long an advocate of face-to-face communication — read Henderson's column and saw it as a "ray of hope." It's one of a few signs, he says, that some members of the tech generation are starting to see the value of quality face time.

As the novelty of their wired lives wears off, they're also are getting more sophisticated about the way they use such tools as social networking and text and instant messaging — not just constantly using them because they're there.

"I think we're at the very beginning of them reaching a saturation point," says Bugeja, director of Iowa State's journalism school and author of "Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age."

Though he's not anti-technology, Bugeja often lectures students about "interpersonal intelligence" — knowing when, where and for what purpose technology is most
Some youth rethink online communications

He points out the students he’s seen walking across campus, holding hands with significant others while talking on cell phones to someone else. He’s also observed them in coffee shops, surrounded by people, but staring instead at a computer screen.

"True friends," he tells them, "need to learn when to stop blogging and go across campus to help a friend."

In the meantime, he says, many professors have begun setting their own limits, banning students from surfing the Internet during lectures.

Of course, these forms of communication continue to dominate. In the October issue of the journal Pediatrics, for instance, researchers at Stanford University released findings from an ongoing study of students at an upper-middle income high school in the San Francisco area. One written survey found that the large majority of students were members of at least one social networking site — 81 percent of them on MySpace. They also found that 89 percent of those students had cell phones, most of them with text and Web surfing capabilities.

They are more wired than ever — but they’re also getting warier.

Increasingly, they’ve had to deal with online bullies, who are posting anything from unflattering photos to online threats.

Privacy issues also are hitting home, most recently when students discovered that personal updates on their Facebook pages were being automatically forwarded to contacts they didn’t necessarily want to have the information. Facebook was forced to let users turn off the data stream after they rebelled.

Increasingly, young people also are realizing that things they post on their profiles can come back to haunt them when applying for school or jobs.

"Maybe everything we thought was so great wasn’t as great as we thought," says Tina Wells, the 20-something CEO of Buzz Marketing, a New York-based firm with young advisers all over the world.

She is among those who wonder if, sometimes, simple face-to-face communication might work better.

In many instances, says 27-year-old Veronica Gross, it does.

"By and large, I would say most of my very geeky social circle prefers face-to-face interaction to mere Internet communication," says Gross, an avid online gamer who is also a doctoral student studying neuroscience at Boston University.

She sees faceless communication as a supplement to everyday interactions, not a replacement. This sentiment also was the conclusion of a study done by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. The study, released earlier this year, found that Internet users tend to have a larger network of close and significant contacts — a median of 37 compared with 30 for nonusers.

Indeed, Steve Miller, a sophomore at Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla., says social networking can be an "extremely effective" way to publicize events to large groups — and even to help build a sense of community on campus.
He joined Facebook as a way to meet people before he started school, but also quickly learned that it had limitations, too.

"I discovered, after meeting many of these (online) friends, that a good Facebook profile could make even the most boring person somewhat interesting," says Miller, who's 19 and now a sophomore.

He's also not always thrilled with text messaging via cell phones, which can be a quick way to say "have a good day" or to coordinate a plan to meet up at a noisy concert.

"Text messaging has become the easy way out," Miller says.

He's had friends cancel a night out with a text message to avoid having to explain. He's also seen some people ask for dates via text to escape the humiliation of hearing a "no" on the phone or in person.

"Our generation needs to get over this fear of confrontation and rejection," he says.

The focus, he and others say, needs to be on quality communication, in all formats.

Back in Iowa, Henderson is enjoying spending more face-to-face time with his friends and less with his computer. He says his decision to quit MySpace and Facebook was a good one.

"I'm not sacrificing friends," he says, "because if a picture, some basic information about their life and a Web page is all my friendship has become, then there was nothing to sacrifice to begin with."

___

On the Net:


___

Martha Irvine is a national writer specializing in coverage of people in their 20s and younger. She can be reached at mirvine(at)ap.org

RECOMMEND THIS STORY
Recommend It: Average (19 votes)
☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

» Recommended Stories

Technology News
Gadget makers fear new copyright levies hurt sales Reuters
Google in talks to buy Web video site YouTube: report Reuters
Microsoft is not trying to block access says Kaspersky Reuters

Most Viewed - Technology
Miniskirts steal limelight at Japan tech trade show Reuters
Some youth rethink online communications AP
Russian music Internet site refuses to buckle to US pressure AFP
Gadget makers fear new copyright levies hurt