Clive Thompson says the digital age is making us smarter and the kids are still all right

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- From: The Daily Telegraph
- February 01, 2014 12:00AM

https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/clive-thompson-says-the-digital-age-is-making-us-smarter-and-the-kids-are-still-all-right/news-story/4c023b8e333e3fde82788323190232fc

The digital lives of teenagers have become the target of weekly attacks.
Source: ThinkStock

I ASK a teenage girl, how often do you text?

"About 250 times a day, or something," she tells me.

Shocking! The digital lives of teenagers have become the target of weekly attacks.

In a recent essay, the novelist Jonathan Franzen bemoaned online socialising, arguing that it was creating a uniquely shallow and trivial culture, making kids unable to socialise face to face.

Then the American comedian Louis CK proclaimed on TV that he wouldn't give his daughters mobile phones for fear they wouldn't develop empathy.

There's also the scientist and writer Susan Greenfield's famously apocalyptic warnings: "We could be raising a hedonistic generation who live only in the thrill of the computer-generated moment and are in distinct danger of detaching themselves from what the rest of us would consider the real world."

Young teenagers texting on mobile phones. Picture: Supplied
Source: News Limited

As a parent of two boys at primary school, I'm not immune to worrying about these issues. And you don't need to be a parent to fret about the effect of all this technology on young people.

Newspapers are constantly filled with frightening accounts of pornography addiction and of aggression supposedly caused by violent video games, particularly now that Grand Theft Auto V has hit the shelves. But even when these accounts touch on real concerns, they don't really reflect the great mass of everyday teenage social behaviour: the online chat, the texting, the surfing and the emergence of a new teenage sphere that is conducted digitally.

That trend is real. Is it, as Franzen and the others fear, turning kids into emoticon-addled zombies, unable to connect, unable to form a coherent thought or even make eye contact? Could this be?

I don't think so.

Ruth Williams, 18, and Annika Tyr-Egge, 19, at Manly play and text with their mobile phones.
Source: DailyTelegraph

Let's go back to that girl who texts 250 times a day. The truth is, she was an extreme case I picked to startle you because when I interviewed her, she was in a group of friends with a much wider range of experiences.

Two others said they text only 10 times a day. One was a Facebook refusenik ("I'm all Instagram, pictures of what I'm doing in the city with my friends. We're visual."

A few were devotees of Snapchat, the app that lets you send a picture or text that, like a Cold War communiqué, is destroyed after one viewing.

One had a phone filled with charmingly goofy emoticons; another disapproved - "I'm a skilled writer," she told me. "People sometimes misunderstand tone, so you have to be precise."

As it turns out, the diversity of use in this group of friends is confirmed by research. Fewer than 20 per cent of kids send more than 200 texts a day; 31 per cent send barely 20 or fewer.

Georgia Thomas sends a text. A study claims texting helps students literacy.
Source: News Limited

New technologies always provoke generational panic, which usually has more to do with adult fears than with the lives of teenagers.

In the 1930s, parents fretted that radio was gaining "an invincible hold of their children". In the '80s, the great danger was the Sony Walkman producing the teenager who "throbs with orgasmic rhythms", as the philosopher Allan Bloom claimed. When you look at today's digital activity, the facts are much more positive than you might expect.

Indeed, social scientists who study young people have found that their digital use can be inventive and even beneficial. This is true not just in terms of their social lives but their education, too. So if you use a ton of social media, do you become unable, or unwilling, to engage in face-to-face contact?

The evidence suggests not.

Research by Amanda Lenhart of the Pew Research Centre, a US think-tank, found that the most avid texters are also the kids most likely to spend time with friends in person. One form of socialising doesn't replace the other. It augments it.

"Kids still spend time face to face," Lenhart says. Indeed, as they get older and are given more freedom, they often ease up on social networking. Early on, the web is their "third space", but by the

late teens it's replaced in reaction to greater autonomy.

The digital age is making us smarter, argues Clive Thompson
Source: AFP

They have to be on Facebook to know what's going on among friends and family, but they are ambivalent about it, says Rebecca Eynon, a research fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, who has interviewed about 200 teenagers over three years.

As they gain experience with living online, they begin to adjust their behaviour, wrestling with new communication skills, as they do in real life.

Parents are wrong to worry that kids don't care about privacy. In fact, they spend hours tweaking Facebook settings or using quick-delete sharing tools, such as Snapchat, to minimise their traces. Or they post a photograph on Instagram, have a pleasant conversation with friends then delete it so that no traces remain.

This is not to say that kids always use good judgment. Like everyone else they make mistakes, sometimes serious ones. But working out how to behave online is a new social skill. While there's plenty of drama and messiness online, it is not, for most teens, a cycle of non-stop abuse: a Pew study found only 15 per cent of teens said someone had been mean or cruel to them online in the last 12 months.

As wrenching as the worst-case scenarios of bullying are, and as urgently as those need to be addressed, they are not, thankfully, a daily occurrence for most kids.

Even sexting may be rarer than expected. Pew found only 4 per cent of teenagers had sent a "sext"

and only 15 per cent had received one - less of an epidemic than you would imagine.

But surely all this short-form writing is eroding literacy? Teachers certainly worry. Pew Centre surveys have found teachers say kids use overly casual language and text-speak in writing, and don't have as much patience for long, immersive reading and complex arguments.

Students using their mobile phones at school.
Source: News Limited

Yet studies of first-year college papers suggest these anxieties may be partly based on misguided nostalgia. When Stanford University scholar Andrea Lunsford gathered data on the rates of errors in "freshman composition" papers going back to 1917, she found that they were virtually identical to today.

But even as error rates stayed stable, student essays have blossomed in size and complexity. They are now six times longer and, unlike older "what I did this summer" essays, they offer arguments buttressed by evidence. Why?

Computers have vastly increased the ability of students to gather information, sample different points of view and write more fluidly.

When the linguist Naomi Baron studied students' instant messaging, even there she found surprisingly rare usage of short forms such as "u" for "you". And as students got older, they began to write in more grammatical sentences. That's because it confers status: they want to seem more adult, and they know

how adults are expected to write. "If you want to look serious," as the teenager Sydney told me, "you don't use 'u'." Clearly, teaching teens formal writing is still crucial, but texting probably isn't destroying their ability to learn it.

It is probably true that fewer kids are heavy readers compared with two generations ago, when cheap paperbacks spiked rates of reading.

But even back then, as the literacy expert Wendy Griswold says, a minority of people, perhaps 20 per cent, were lifelong heavy readers, and it was cable TV, not the internet, that struck a blow at that culture in the '80s.

There are even texting competitions.
Source: AFP

Griswold still finds that 15 per cent or more of kids are deeply bookish. "The ambitious kids. I see no reason that says that it's going to change."

In fact, the online world offers kids remarkable opportunities to become literate and creative because young people can now publish ideas not just to their friends, but to the world. And it turns out that when they write for strangers, their sense of "authentic audience" makes them work harder, push themselves further, and create powerful new communicative forms.

Consider Sam McPherson. At 13, he became obsessed with the television show Lost and began to

contribute to a fan-run wiki. "I jumped in and just started editing," Sam says.

He developed skills in co-operating with far-flung strangers and keeping cool while meditating arguments.

This type of interaction online with strangers can make kids more community-minded. Joseph Kahne, a professor of education at Mills College in California, studied 400 teenagers over three years. Kahne found that teens who participated in fan or hobby sites were more likely than other kids to do real-world volunteering. Interestingly, this wasn't true of being on Facebook.

Indeed, you could argue that parents should encourage their kids to spend less time on Facebook and more on sites devoted to their obsessions. Take Tavi Gevinson, a 17-year-old student who founded and edits Rookie, a site that features articles by and for young women.

She says online socialising is "the opposite of isolation - it's all about connection. I've made some of my closest friends online".

Teachers who understand this insight have begun to transform their classrooms. One day I visited the class of Lou Lahana, a computer teacher at a school in a low-income area.

I met one student who was frequently in trouble, with a bad truancy record and rock-bottom grades - a classic drop-out risk.

But in Lahana's class, he had discovered a talent using 3D SketchUp software. The student began to produce gorgeous renderings of famous buildings, which Lahana posted online for the world to see.

"I could be an architect," he told me, as I watched him sketch a version of New York's Guggenheim Museum on screen. "This is the first thing I've seen where I thought, OK, I get this, I love this, I could do this."

Few would deny that too much time online can be harmful. As Louis CK points out, some of the dangers are emotional: hurting someone from a distance is not the same as hurting them face to face. If we're lucky, the legal environment will change to make teenagers' online lives less likely to haunt them later on. Just last week, California passed a law allowing minors to demand that internet firms erase their digital past and the EU has contemplated similar legislation.

Texting twins.
Source: Supplied

Distraction is also a serious issue. When kids flip from chat to music to homework, they are indeed likely to have trouble doing each task well.

And studies show that pupils don't check the veracity of information online - "smart searching" is a skill schools need to teach urgently. It's also true, Lenhart points out, that too much social networking and game playing can cut into schoolwork and sleep. This is precisely why parents need to set firm boundaries around it, as with any other distraction.

But many teenagers recognise this. "Maybe it's a natural part of maturing," one girl says about her reduced use of social networking. "I try not to check Facebook until I've done my homework."

"You do not," laughs her friend. "I've seen you!"

"Well, I'm trying!"

So what's the best way to cope? The same boring old advice that applies to everything in parenting. "Moderation," Lenhart says.

Rebecca Eynon argues that it's key to model good behaviour. Parents who stare non-stop at their phones and don't read books are likely to breed kids who will do the same. As ever, we ought to

scrutinise our own behaviour.

As for young people, they are perfectly capable of considering the richness, and the contradictions, of their own experience. Tavi Gevinson knows there is a dark side to online life. Yet she sees powerful advantages. "For a lot of people my age, it's not like we meet online and only talk online. The goal is to meet in person and to forge that connection."

Clive Thompson is the author of Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds For The Better.