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TEENS’ ONLINE AND OFFLINE LIVES
How They Are Experiencing Their Sociability

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Introduction

Sociability – or, to put it simply, “association for its own sake” (Simmel, 1949, p. 254) – has long been a recurrent subject of study. Despite being traditionally present in research on teenagers’ relationship with the media, it has been gaining renewed interest in the digital and online communication era due to the proliferation of new technologies which open up possibilities for the creation of new forms of sociability. This concept, according to Haddon (2017, p. 244), has been used “to capture the nature of our interactions, our communications, and our relationships” with others. Fortunati, Taipale, and de Luca (2013, p. 895) add that “sociability takes place in cooperation with others and necessitates movement as well as communication”.

Sociability has always been dependent on different kinds of constraints and the history of social ties is also the history of the fall of different technological barriers. Over time, numerous inventions determined different forms of mutual interaction (handwriting and paper, transport and post, to mention just a few), helping humans to model new ways to connect and to communicate with one another – with family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Each new technology, in its time, meant a small revolution, eliminating time and/or space constraints, facilitating the maintenance or the creation of social bonds; in sum, enriching sociability possibilities.

In the last (almost) three decades (Fortunati et al., 2013), digital media has brought the technical possibilities of new forms of communication, interaction, and participation, giving people the opportunity to speak, to write, to share what is happening in their lives for the first time combining three crucial factors: time (anytime), place (almost anywhere), and affordability (at minimal cost). However, there is no consensus regarding the consequences of this panorama since both apocalyptic and enthusiastic perspectives have been voiced, particularly regarding its impact on young people. On the one hand, it is argued that digital communication can merely promote superficial ties, decreasing the time people have for face-to-face relations – an argument known as the displacement hypothesis (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011) – and fostering shallow relationships and different kinds of risks, from excessive exposure to online harassment. On the other hand, a more optimistic perspective – the stimulation hypothesis (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011) – underlines the promotion and the reinforcement of social interactions, saying that digital media
help youngsters “to conduct the social psychological task of adolescence” (Livingstone, 2008, p. 396), engaging in some risks and taking opportunities to present and manage their – now online and offline – persona while learning to make sense of social situations (Lim, 2013, p. 325). The latter “has received more support than the displacement hypothesis”, as summarised by Valkenburg and Peter (2011, p. 124). However, both sides present valid arguments: as the teenagers’ world cannot be read only in black and white tones, and since their media practices are heterogeneous (Hasebrink, 2012; Vanden Abeele, 2016), both risks and opportunities could be present (Livingstone, Mascheroni, & Staksrud, 2018; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011) when associating digital/online communication with sociability.

Studies of media and adolescents’ sociability conducted in the last decade (e.g., Haddon, 2017; Lim, 2013; Ling & Bertel, 2013; Mesch, 2013; Mesch & Talmud, 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011) stress precisely the newer and more complex tones with which digital media has imbued sociability. According to these studies, young people are experiencing new forms of sociability in which digital media and social networks assume a prominent place. As pointed out by Mesch (2013, p. 292), digital media, in most cases, are promoting “existing social contacts with friends from school, connecting adolescents into local, rather than global, networks”. Operating in a “logic of anytime-anyplace connectivity” (Vanden Abeele, 2016, p. 90), social networks – and the devices where they are based, such as mobile phones – foster a connected presence (Nag, Ling, & Jakobsen, 2016) which might not have a major purpose besides “simply being together and acknowledging the other in one’s life” (Lüders, 2011, p. 454).

Based on such topics discussed by earlier studies and having drawn on data provided by the Portuguese branch of the European research project Transmedia Literacy, this chapter is guided by the following research question: how are digital and online media contributing to teenagers’ sociability? Floridi’s onlife concept (2007, 2015), presented below, will anchor this discussion.

### Teenagers’ ‘Onlife’ Sociability

Gustavo Mesch (2013), who has conducted extensive research on adolescents and sociability, but also Sun Sun Lim (2013) and Ralph Schroeder (2016), emphasised the increasing fading of the boundaries established between offline and online lives. Mesch stated that “with the passage of time the online/offline comparison is becoming a faded and even false dichotomy” (2013, p. 293). The views of these authors concerning media and sociability are mirrored in the broader concept of ‘onlife’ coined by Luciano Floridi, which is focused precisely on the blurring of the concepts of online and offline in human lives. For this researcher and philosopher this is what the current younger generations are already experiencing as he considers his own generation to most likely be the last “to experience a clear difference between onlife and online” (Floridi, 2007, p. 62). This transformation is, from Floridi’s point of view, more than a simple shift, it is a “revolution”, the fourth in terms of philosophical anthropology, after Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud (Floridi, 2015, p. 21). It opens up a new era, given the strong impacts ICTs have on the human condition that reverberate in different domains and also on the concept discussed herein: sociability. As mentioned in The Onlife Manifesto, subscribed to in 2013 by 15 scholars from different areas:

> ICT are not mere tools but rather environmental forces that are increasingly affecting:
> 1. Our self-conception (who we are); 2. Our mutual interactions (how we socialise); 3. Our conception of reality (our metaphysics); and 4. Our interactions with reality (our agency).

*(Floridi, 2015, p. 2)*
Simon and Ess (2015, p. 157) summarise the onlife concept noting that it designates the “transformational reality that in contemporary developed societies, with few exceptions, our offline and online experiences and lives are inextricably interwoven”. Regarding teenagers’ mutual interactions, data presented below clearly show that young people are living in an ‘onlife-world’ experiencing an ‘always on’ sociability (Baron, 2008) with their peers, which corroborates Floridi’s perspective.

Being Young and Socialising in the Digital Era

Methods

The media practices of Portuguese youngsters who participated in the Transmedia Literacy project are at the centre of this chapter. Lasting from 2015 to 2018, this project, funded by the European Commission, involved eight countries and sought to exploit teenagers’ transmedia skills and informal learning strategies to improve their formal education.

Teenagers from all the countries were involved in fieldwork comprising three phases: 1) administration of a questionnaire to obtain information about teens’ socio-cultural backgrounds and media access, uses, and perceptions; 2) two participatory workshops to explore, in an immersive way, the teens’ transmedia practices and informal learning strategies while engaging them in media production and gameplay; 3) in-depth interviews with a sample of participants in the workshops (who were also challenged to complete a one-week media diary) to get to know their doings and sayings as regards media, social networks, and videogames. These methodological procedures were part of a triangulation effort in an ethnographic-inspired study based on short-term approaches (Pink & Ardevòl, 2018).

The Portuguese sample was recruited in two different public schools, one from an urban area and the other from a rural one. In each school, two classes were chosen: one from the national 7th grade (12–14 year-olds) and the other from the 10th grade (15–16 year-olds). In total, 77 students completed the questionnaire, 78 participated in the workshops, and 40 were interviewed. Table 14.1 summarises the constitution of the Portuguese sample.

Drawing on the data of the three research phases mentioned above, this chapter looks at the role of digital media in teenagers’ sociability. Approaching the topic from their own practices and voices, it addresses the aforementioned research question: how are digital and online media contributing to teenagers’ sociability?

How are Digital and Online Media Contributing to Teenagers’ Sociability?

It clearly emerged from this study that this is a connected generation, which is not in fact a novelty, considering the results of other national (Pereira, Pinto, & Moura, 2015; Simões, Ponte, Ferreira, 2015).
Data from questionnaires revealed that being on social media and communicating/talking to friends is what students say they like the most on the internet (45). Going on social media and checking notifications/messages is also the first thing students do when they connect to the internet (55) and this happens throughout the day. Texting and talking to friends is an activity they do very regularly and, on many occasions, simultaneously with other activities. They are permanently in touch with each other when they are not co-present, and technologies link them even when friends share the same physical space. That is, even when together they tend to connect to some device:

During the break I watched videos on YouTube with friends.

(15-year-old boy)

Sometimes, here at school, I’m in a certain place and a classmate of mine is in another and we’re playing [8 Ball Pool].

(15-year-old girl)

Technologies are at the core of the socialising process, wherever it takes place: at school, at home, but also when teens meet up at each other’s houses. According to a five-point Likert scale, watching videos (M= 3.51) and series (M= 3.26), playing videogames (M= 3.45) and making videos (M= 2.77) are quite common practices when they go to friends’ houses, as the excerpt below from the interview with a 16-year-old boy illustrates:

[Researcher]: Do you usually play videogames with your schoolmates?

[Félix]: Yes, yes. Last Friday, before “Braga Romana” [a public event], we went to my house. We should have gone out at nine, but we ended up going out just at 11 o’clock as we...
had been playing PES [Pro Evolution Soccer]. What matters is playing with friends. When we have friends visiting us we try to play as much as we can.

[Researcher]: When your friends visit you is it to play videogames?
[Félix]: No, it’s about spending time with friends. But, of course, we always play videogames and joke around. It’s always like this.

Non-face-to-face contact mediated by technologies takes on two dimensions: it occurs mainly with real-life friends while a minority establish contact with people they just know from the virtual sphere and with whom they share some entertainment or cultural interests. It is with their everyday friends that they develop closeness and build a sense of intimacy, which resonates with what was stated by Mesch (2013) regarding the prevalence of local, rather than global, networks in teenagers’ sociability.

Portable technologies have allowed the extension of media use to times and spaces where they were once absent. The media are everywhere and available all the time in teenagers’ lives. Socialising is an act that nowadays does not exist disconnected from technologies. More than an overlap between teenagers’ online and offline worlds, online communication is complimenting, extending and reinforcing sociability. Online communication is teenagers’ mode of everyday communication with peers, and media content and their own media practices are a regular topic in their conversations.

This online world, so important for teenagers’ sociability, is sparsely inhabited by adults and is even considered to be off-limits to them. At the time this study was conducted, teenagers were abandoning Facebook because their parents had begun to use it. They did not eliminate their profiles and they continue to operate on this platform, but more as discrete observers than active participants. At that time, they began to resort more often to Instagram, a social network that keeps them away and safe from the eyes of their parents. Thus, there is a world in teenagers’ online communication that they share only with their peers, where adults are cut off from this domain. This does not mean that teenagers do not communicate online with adults, such as parents, other relatives, and teachers, but with them they establish other types of conversation. Since in adolescence there have always been spaces, places, and conversations which are out of bounds for adults, these findings are neither new nor surprising. What does merit close attention, however, is whether the time spent by children and young people (and adults as well) on their mobile devices, the time spent on their screens, is keeping them away from their family.

An aspect that digital technologies have promoted concerns the exchange of information regarding school. Social networks are now a medium used to share general information, to ask questions about some subjects, to share texts and other materials. This is also an important form of sociability, which involves the entire class and is beneficial for all students.

Another insight that emerges from the analysis of the data concerns the importance digital technologies have had in reducing the inequalities among students from different geographical areas. This study was conducted in an urban and in a rural area and no significant differences were found with regard to connectivity and access. This could be a general benefit of being connected online. Digital technologies allow them to belong and to participate in the social activities and exchanges of their peer groups and to expand their relationships. For those who live in an isolated geographical area (as is the case of the participants from the countryside), this is undoubtedly a great benefit, although it does not erase all inequalities. As was the case in a previous study carried out in Portugal with children aged between eight and ten years old (Pereira, Pereira, & Melro, 2015), in which the geographical area variable was also considered, the differences found were not in access, but rather in their capacity to critically analyse, interpret, and understand messages. In the case of these students, what differentiates those from the urban area from those of...
the countryside is teenagers’ and their friends’ cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and media repertoires. The media repertoires of the rural students were more limited and this was due to the more restricted information circulating among peer groups, which was much broader among students in the urban area.

Finally, on the recurring question of whether mediated communication leads to fewer face-to-face meetings or to a diminishing of their importance, teenagers replied that digital technologies, especially the smartphone, that they carry and access easily everywhere, enable them to be in near-permanent contact with friends, enhancing their sociability. But these teenagers consider that such mediated communications do not replace face-to-face relationships. In any case, the analysis of the data shows that mediated sociability is reinforced but not necessarily extended to a larger circle of people. They tend to follow, to contact, and to talk to their close circle of friends, the ones they also speak with in their offline lives.

Conclusion

As young people move beyond the nuclear family, peers play an increasingly central role (Lim, 2013; Nag et al., 2016). Valkenburg and Peter (2011, p. 122) state that one of the fundamental tasks assigned to adolescence is to develop “the abilities that are necessary to form, maintain, and terminate close, meaningful relationships with friends”. Various authors have pointed to the importance of everyday friends – as well as family, teachers or neighbours, albeit to a lesser extent (Livingstone & Haddon, 2012; Nag et al., 2016) – as the main interlocutors within adolescents’ sociability, underlining the digital media capacity for expanding the geographic reach of relationships (Livingstone et al., 2018; Mesch, 2013; Pereira, Moura, Masanet, Taddeo, & Tirocchi, 2018).

Despite the intrinsic and diverse social features of the media (Baym, 2015; McQuail, 1997), digital platforms, such as social networks, have undoubtedly opened up new possibilities, different in nature and intensity and providing distinctive affordances (Hall, 2018) for interpersonal mediated communication. They are simultaneously content providers and platforms for some sorts of communication (Lim, 2013). Teens establish a continuous dialogue among themselves in a permanent fusion of online and offline lives, materialising Floridi’s concept of “onlife”, which suggests the “very distinction between online and offline will become blurred” (Floridi, 2007, p. 61).

While media and adolescents’ culture have always been closely connected (Arnett, 1995), they now seem to be umbilically linked. But while friends are omnipresent in a variety of ways – from public displays of interaction to committed private chats and mere connected presences – adults are many times avoided or, at least, filtered out. For adolescents, social networks are particularly important to share ‘private experiences’, create ‘spaces of intimacy’ (Livingstone, 2008, p. 11) and also ‘affinity spaces’, that is, “a place or set of places where people can affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals” (Gee, 2004, p. 67). These are spaces mostly inhabited by members of a ‘walled community’ (Ling & Haddon, 2008, p. 146), which leads us to question if teens are taking advantage of all the opportunities that technologies give them in terms of sociability or if they are creating a ‘filter bubble’ (Pariser, 2011) by reinforcing the relationships and the conversations with people they already know or with whom they share the same interests, ideas, and opinions, keeping away or avoiding contacts and contents that do not fit their profiles. When analysing the media practices of the Portuguese sample, but also those from Italy and Spain (Pereira et al., 2018), it is possible that the preference for a close circle of friends in their online sociability could also be a way to protect their privacy as it avoids greater exposure to risk and makes the experience pleasurable.

Teenagers’ online behaviour is not homogeneous and having access to the digital world or even interacting there does not equate to wise use. In this study, the results on teenagers’ sociability are somewhat in line with the findings on media production practices and competences (Pereira & Moura, 2018). In the same way that having access to the media does not mean they
produce content and participate in the digital public sphere, contacting others and friends online does not mean that they go beyond their close circle of friends and expand social ties and horizons. The experience reported above by the adolescents themselves conveys a strengthening of their existing social ties, showing that those with whom they socialise in the virtual sphere are mostly their everyday friends. The process of self-disclosure in this mediated sociability sphere “becomes an ever-evolving cycle through which individual identity is presented, compared, adjusted, or defended against a constellation of social, cultural, economic, or political realities” (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 304). In the study reported here it was not possible to verify the premise of Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten (2006, p. 589) that “positive feedback enhanced adolescents’ self-esteem, and negative feedback decreased their self-esteem”, but it was clear that teenagers regularly follow and monitor the posts that they, and others, share on social media and that they appreciate positive feedback on their posts, they count the likes obtained (for example, eliminating a photo that does not reach the number of likes they expect) and these make them happy, at least.

Online sociability may not be free of risks (for instance, talking to strangers, revealing personal data, being tricked), however this was not a major concern among adolescents and did not figure much in their discourses. In fact, they said they feel confident and informed about such things. Online risks and their prevention are issues that draw schools’ attention and therefore training sessions are usually held for students. In the schools participating in the study and throughout most of Portugal, this is, indeed, the media literacy topic that is most discussed and addressed in the school context, and sometimes the only one.

To conclude, it may be argued that sociability is a subject of study that will never be exhausted. On the one hand, the lives of children and adolescents are dynamic, and, on the other hand, digital technologies and the internet, besides being dynamic as well, will continue to influence and affect how people communicate and interact with each other. Topics such as the risk of isolation and of being ‘alone together’ (Turkle, 2012), the fear of substitution of face-to-face interaction by online relationships, and sociability during vacation time, when teenagers do not regularly meet up with their schoolmates, need to be further studied. This chapter, based on results involving a small sample of Portuguese adolescents, has brought to light some contributions to understand better how sociability is experienced in a hyperconnected era, having the advantage of making the voices of the young people themselves known. The major conclusion is undoubtedly that teenagers’ sociability is deeply mediated by technologies that complement, expand, and reinforce forms of co-present sociability, but that it is also clearly different (Schroeder, 2016) in terms of the way they pay attention and how they verbally and non-verbally react one to another. When they interact and communicate online and when they share mundane events from their everyday life, they do not always intend to create or reinforce social bonds, they simply want to foster an ‘online togetherness’, that is, “a sense of being together online” (Schroeder, 2016, p. 5634) in an increasingly ‘onlife’ world, always on.

References


