The Benefits of Social Networking Services

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Literature Review

For Young People

Cooperative Research Centre

Technology and Wellbeing

Preface

In December 2010, the Australian Government and Cooperative Research Centres Program announced a $27M investment towards the establishment of a world class research centre. The first of its kind, it is dedicated to working with young people to develop and trial new technologies designed to improve mental health and promote wellbeing.

Led by the Inspire Foundation, an international non-government organisation, the Cooperative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing (YAW-CRC) brings together 63 partners in an enviable mix of world class youth researchers across 13 universities, innovative thinkers from industry and business, and mental health and youth advocates across the non-government and government sector. Driven by the vision and passion of young people, the federal government's investment is matched by over $80M in cash and in kind contributions from YAW-CRC participants.

Never before have the Australian youth and mental health sectors united so cohesively behind a single vision: to use technologies to ensure that young Australians are given the opportunity to grow up safe, happy, healthy and resilient.

YAW-CRC's research agenda has been developed with over **600 young people**. It focuses on achieving change through collaboration and partnership between researchers and end-users, defined as young people, parents, professionals and members of the community. YAW-CRC's work is organised into three separate but complementary research programs:

- **Program One: Safe and Supportive:** explores technologies as settings to promote cybersafety and strengthen the resilience and wellbeing of ALL young people.
- **Program Two: Connected and Creative:** examines how technologies can enable the good mental health of young people who are vulnerable or marginalised.
- **Program Three: User Driven and Empowered:** investigates how technologies can facilitate good mental health for young people experiencing mental health problems.

Technology has significantly changed the way in which young people interact with one another and the world around them. The majority of young Australians use the internet or a mobile phone to source information, engage and construct and maintain social networks. Technologies have dramatically transformed young people's relationships with one another, their families and communities. Young people's online behaviour is often not well understood resulting in a 'digital disconnect' between young people's use of technology and the knowledge and concerns that parents, professionals and community members share about this use.

This report produced by the Cooperative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing presents research conducted by the Inspire Foundation, University of Western Sydney and Murdoch University. It summarises the current evidence relating to the impact of Social Networking Services in the context of young people's everyday lives. This seminal report provides a critical evidence base for youth based organisations looking to incorporate social networking into their programs. Additionally it provides a summary of essential research which will provide the foundations for educational resources for parents, professionals and young people.

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CRC for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing

Essential Partners

Supporting Partners

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

The use of Social Networking Services (SNS) – such as Facebook.com and Twitter.com – has become a popular and integral part of everyday communication in Australia. Young people in Australia are particularly enthusiastic users: the vast majority are engaging on a daily basis with SNS via a computer or mobile phone. Research in this area is an emerging field and studies identifying the negative impacts have tended to dominate the popular media and much policy development. However, there is substantial evidence of the benefits associated with SNS use, which has been largely neglected in public debate. The following report summarises current evidence concerning the enabling effects of SNS in the context of young people's everyday lives. Drawing on a range of sources this summary encompasses a variety of disciplines including education, sociology, political science, cultural studies and health. Whilst the report draws upon an international literature, the focus is on the Australian context.

This review finds that there are a number of significant benefits associated with the use of SNS including: delivering educational outcomes; facilitating supportive relationships; identity formation; and, promoting a sense of belonging and self-esteem. Furthermore, the strong sense of community and belonging fostered by SNS has the potential to promote resilience, which helps young people to successfully adapt to change and stressful events. Importantly, the benefits of SNS use are dependent on good internet and media literacy: having the skills to critically understand, analyse and create media content. Maximising the benefits of SNS and promoting internet and media literacy may help protect young people from many of the risks of online interaction, such as cyber-bullying, privacy breaches and predation. For example, understanding how to produce creative content and manage the distribution of this content supports fully informed decision making and assessment of one's own, and others', privacy.

Policy currently focuses primarily on regulating the negative effects of SNS and social media, frequently framing digital citizenship within an online risk-management paradigm. This report finds that the benefits of social networking are largely associated with the participatory nature of the contemporary digital environment. Yet participation in creative content production, dissemination and consumption is largely overlooked in cybersafety frameworks. The emphasis on the risks of SNS use is exacerbated by limited intergenerational understanding of young people's ability to navigate online environments and narrow definitions of youth citizenship. Reconceptualising these challenges in terms of expanding young people's digital citizenship opens up the potential to maximise the wide range of substantive benefits associated with online communicative practices.

Finally, strategies for maximising the benefits of SNS use must be underpinned by best practice evidence. More targeted research needs to be undertaken to ensure specific emerging practices are properly understood so the positive effects of SNS can be leveraged. Given young people are often proficient users of online and networked technologies, this report finds that strategies which

promote dialogue and position young people as SNS experts may help to open up new spaces for policy making, program development and, ultimately, safe and respectful online practices by young and old alike.

Introduction

Although people have been using the internet to connect with others since the early 1980s, it is only in the last decade that social networking services have proliferated and their use has become a widespread practice – particularly amongst young people (Horizon, 2009).

Social networking services can be defined as:

> [W]eb-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (boyd & Ellison 2007).

Social networking services (SNS) are increasingly popular amongst Australian young people regardless of geographical location, background and age. They include services such as Facebook.com, MySpace.com and Bebo.com which have many millions of members each. It also includes services, such as Elftown.com (for fans of fantasy and science fiction) and Ravelry.com (for fans of knitting!) with small numbers of members, often connected by a specific common interest. Furthermore, many services created for media sharing (e.g. Flickr for photo sharing, Last.FM for music listening habits and YouTube for video sharing) have incorporated profile and networking features and may be thought of as part of this wider conceptualisation of SNS themselves (boyd & Ellison 2008:216). Indeed, SNS in a Web 2.0 environment have transformed processes of communication and social interaction particularly with the increasing integration of social media functionality to these services.

Social media is generally used to describe collaborative media creation and sharing on a fairly large scale (that can include SNS but also other participatory media activities such as news blogs) but can be extended to include smaller user-generated content networks or micro-communities (i.e. the 'small media' aspect of the current media environment), and things that sometimes fall outside SNS such as blogs/vlogs, podcasts, wikis, game modding[1]. The rapid uptake of both social media and SNS practices by young people signifies an important shift in young peoples' use of the net primarily for information and entertainment to one of communication. Young people are consuming, producing, sharing and remixing media. This has led to the claim that today's

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[1] Game modding is the practice of modifiying an existing PC game (usually a first-person shooter or real-time multiplayer game), most commonly by adding new content (weapons, characters, levels, music, story lines etc). Modifications – or 'mods' - can be created by the official game developer, but are more often the unpaid 'creative labour' of game enthusiasts or 'modders' within the gaming community (Kücklich, 2005).

young people are 'produsers' they actively produce *and* consume media (Bruns 2008). This participatory media environment enables young people to engage in creative content production, empowering them with new means of creating and sustaining connections with others. It has also opened up new debates on how to conceptualise and promote what has come to be termed *cybercitizenship* (Bennett, 1998, 2003; Coleman, 2005).

For the purposes of this paper we focus on use of SNS unless otherwise stipulated. However, it is emphasised that use of SNS is an increasingly complex communicative practice intrinsically linked to the diversification of media practices. Research in this area is an emerging field and research identifying the negative impacts has tended to dominate the popular media and much policy development. There is, however, substantial evidence of the benefits associated with SNS use which has been largely neglected in public debate. The following report summarises current evidence relating to the enabling effects of SNS in the context of young people's everyday lives. Drawing on articles and reports by academics, industry, non-government and government researchers, this summary encompasses a range of disciplines including education, sociology, political science, cultural studies and health. Whilst the report draws upon an international literature, the focus is on the Australian context.

The first section of the report presents *Young People's Social Networking in Context*: a brief summary young people's use of ICT and SNS, and the challenges associated with SNS. The second part of the report presents *The Benefits of Social Networking Practices.*

Part 1: Young People's Social Networking in Context

Technology Access and Use

Almost all young Australians are online with 90% of 16 – 29 years olds using the internet daily (Ewing et al 2009:2; Nielson, 2010a). They spend more time online (an average of 22 hours per week) than any other age group (Ewing et al 2009:2). Many young people are able to access quality internet at home: 67% of households have internet access with 78% connected through broadband (ABS 2010). They are also early adopters in the mobile phone market with 97 per cent owning a mobile phone of which 64% are internet capable (Nielson 2010a). Young people are increasingly using their mobile phones to access the internet (34% of 18-24 years olds), making it the fifth most common use of mobile phones in that age group (AIMIA 2009). In addition to downloading content, looking up information and emailing, mobile engagement with SNS is rapidly gaining popularity: 26% of SNS users access these services via their mobile devices (Nielson, 2010a).

The importance of SNS in young people's everyday lives is indisputable: 90% of 12 to 17 year olds, and 97% of 16 to 17 year olds, use SNS (ACMA 2009a). SNS use is the number one online activity for 16 to 29 year olds with 83% reporting they use them on a regular basis (Nielson 2010a). The primary uses of the most popular SNS, such as Facebook and MySpace include: updating one's own profile; posting a message on a friend's wall; commenting on photo or video content of their own or others; posting photos or video content; joining a group and playing games (Nielson 2010b:58). While the reading and writing of blogs remains in the top ten online activities carried out by young people, its popularity is decreasing particularly with the rise of micro-blogging practices, for example via Twitter and the Facebook's 'status' function, both of which are further enabled by the use of SNS via mobile phones (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zichur 2010).

In general, Australians are the world's most prolific users of social media, and young people under 25 are the most active group when it comes to creating, updating and viewing social media (Nielson 2010 c). For those in the 14 to17 age group, 78% have created content, 84% have updated a social media profile, and 92% have viewed someone else's content/site. In the 18 to 24 age group, 65% have created content, 89% have updated a profile, and a staggering 95% have viewed someone else's content (Nielson 2010b).

In the following sections of this report, we outline a range of risks and opportunities associated with the practices of social networking that must be understood and addressed by young people, policy makers and the community. In doing so, we emphasise that SNS in and of themselves do

not yield particular risks or benefits. Rather, it is the sets of communicative and creative practices in which SNS are embedded that lead to positive or negative impacts. We firstly outline the risks that must be managed, and then describe the diverse range of positive effects - at both the level of the individual and the community – arising from social networking practices. It is crucial to highlight that the risks and opportunities associated with social networking practices are interdependent. That is, promoting the positive impacts of social networking depends in large part on developing young people's strategies and skills for managing online risks. Simultaneously though, as we discuss below, emerging research shows that fostering the positive social, cultural and educational impacts of social networking practices can work to effectively mitigate the potential risks.

Challenges Presented by Social Networking

When engaging in SNS and social media practices, young Australians also navigate a range of risks and challenges. These include the management of personal information and privacy, the risk of predation and cyberbullying (eg. Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Livingstone 2008; Ybarra et.al. 2007), and understanding copyright law in relation to creative content production. Although Australian parents are also increasingly online, studies suggest that they are less confident in their understanding of more complex digital practices, such as SNS (The Alannah & Madeline Foundation 2009). As such, issues pertaining to the safety and wellbeing of young people using SNS are of particular concern to parents (ACMA, 2009).

The focus on risk and protecting children and young people from harm is often based on concerns that young people lack awareness of the public nature of the internet (Acquisti and Gross 2006; Stutzman 2006; Barnes 2006). In addition to the threat of abuse, some fear that young people's use of SNS can compromise the development and maintenance of supportive friendships and involvement in institutions traditionally understood as the embodiment of 'communities', namely school, sports clubs, families etc (Delmonico & Carnes 1999). These concerns have dominated both public debate and policy-making in recent years.

There is some evidence that young people are aware of potential privacy threats online and many proactively take steps to minimise potential risks (Hitchcock 2008; Lenhart & Madden 2007; Hinduja & Patchin 2008; Warfel 2009, cited in Boyd and Ellison, 2007:222). Research has indicated that online risks 'are not radically different in nature or scope than the risks minors have long faced offline, and minors who are most at risk in the offline world continue to be most at risk online' (Palfrey 2008:7). Although the risks are real and the consequences can be extremely serious, experts emphasise that it is important not to overstate fears or understate the complexity of the challenge (The Alannah & Madeline Foundation 2009:33). Further, given that social networking practices are a routine part of many young people's lives, we need to seek ways to promote the positive impacts of these. Limited intergenerational understanding of young people's

ability to navigate online environments can contribute to a disproportionate emphasis on the risks of SNS use (ACMA 2009c; Bauman 2007). Young people are often proficient users of online and networked technologies. Harnessing, expanding and promoting their skills and understandings of SNS may hold the key for overcoming the issues of concern.

Part 2. Benefits of Social Networking Service Use

There is evidence of a broad range of benefits to young people associated with the use of SNS. Below we summarise these as Media Literacy, Formal Educational Outcomes, Informal Education and Learning, Creativity, Individual Identity and Self-Expression, Strengthening Social Relationships, Belonging and Collective Identity, Building and Strengthening Communities, Civic and Political Participation, Self-Efficacy and Wellbeing.

Media Literacy

The role of media literacy for digital literacy and cybersafety has been well established, although policy and practice has been slow to respond to new ways of thinking about media literacy in a digital world. Traditionally media literacy has been understood and taught in relation to mass media, addressing issues of media ownership, censorship and advertising. However, today's online and networked media environment requires a more complex digital or web literacy that is often not explicitly taught in school. This environment requires that young people develop new skills to participate and stay safe in the new digital media environment. Consequently, there are a number of components to online media literacy (Third and Richardson, forthcoming 2011), including:

- Technical literacy – for example, the knowledge and skills required to use a computer, web browser or particular software program or application;
- Critical content literacy – the ability to effectively use search engines and understand how they 'order' information; who or what organisations created or sponsor the information; where the information comes from and its credibility and/or nature;
- Communicative and social networking literacy – an understanding of the many different spaces of communication on the web; the formal and informal rules that govern or guide what is appropriate behaviour; level of privacy (and therefore level of safe self-disclosure for each); and how to deal with unwanted or inappropriate communication through them;
- Creative content and visual literacy – in addition to the skills to create and upload image and video content this includes understanding how online visual content is edited and 'constructed', what kind of content is appropriate and how copyright applies to their activities;

- Mobile media literacy – familiarity with the skills and forms of communication specific to mobile phones (eg: text messaging); mobile web literacy, and an understanding of mobile phone etiquettes.

Research indicates that the use of social networking services can support the development of media literacy. The creation and sharing of content on services such as MySpace has been seen to increase both young people's 'technical literacy', as they learn to use code to create their profiles, and 'creative content and visual literacy' as they draw from and re-use media in appropriate ways for communication and self-expression (Perkel 2008). Given written text, photos, animation, sounds, music, video clips are core components of SNS, young people develop a deeper understanding of the production, nature and use of various forms of content, which is otherwise missing from school curricula (Skaar 2008).

Education

Formal education

There is much interest from schools, TAFE and Universities in the potential of public SNS and social media such as blogs to leverage or complement formal educational activities and enhance learning outcomes (Brennan 2001, 2003, Notley, 2010). Whilst e-learning frameworks are now integrated into most educational settings, the use of SNS is less comprehensively utilised. Access to SNS varies according to state and educational level with some states banning access to SNS and social media services altogether (Notley, 2009). Consequently there is a dearth of evidence on the impact of SNS on young people's formal education (Anderson 2007). Nevertheless, pilot projects and research are being rolled out which highlight both the potential and the need for social software, services and practices to be integrated into school and higher education frameworks (eg. Fitzgerald & Steele, 2008). SNS is also being used to extend opportunities for formal learning across geographical contexts. For example, within the Linking Latitudes program established by Tasmania's Sacred Heart School and Pularumpi School on Melville Island, learners from both schools use instant messaging and Skype to share information about their cultures and work collaboratively. Using SNS, young people from the two schools interact with learners from over forty other schools (DEECD 2010). Additionally, SNS use between teachers and students can improve rapport and motivation and engagement with education (Mazer, Murphy & Simonds 2007). Studies conducted in the workplace on the role of ICT in learning and development find:

- As a setting for sharing content & creating/maintaining relationships, Web 2.0 functionality facilitates peer-based & self-directed learning;
- Young people in particular value social & interactive opportunities for learning;
- Handheld technology is a particularly useful tool for workplace learning due to 'regular accessibility' (Huffstutler, Wyatt, & Wright 2002);
- Access to virtual or online communities is more important than the physical education environment (education.au 2009);

- Online forums and SNS can support the continuation and extension of learning and discussion outside formal classroom setting (education.au, 2009c);
- Peer based learning is a key characteristic of the way in which young people direct their own learning outside school & formal organisations. This is characterised by a context of reciprocity, where participants feel they can both produce and evaluate knowledge & culture (Ito et al 2008); and,
- Young people expect interactivity "the Net Generation has been described as experiential, engaged, and constantly connected, with a strong need for immediacy" (Ramalay & Zia 2005:87).

Evaluations of e-learning strategies have found SNS platforms allow for the extension of learning discussion outside the formal classroom setting, therefore promoting deeper learning as young people not only engage with the material for longer but are more likely to relate to it and incorporate it into their everyday lives (e.g. education.au 2009 & Notley 2009). Finally, studies conducted on the use of hand held devices to deliver workplace learning demonstrated that 'regular accessibility' means young people can access resources in a way that is both convenient and relevant to them. This in turn translates into increased levels of implementation into work practice (Huffstutler, Wyatt, & Wright 2002).

It is important to note that the educational benefits of SNS are not experienced equally by all young people. Certain groups of learners, such as Indigenous young people, those from low socio-economic backgrounds and those living in remote areas, face persistent challenges of internet access and literacy (MCEETYA 2005; ABS, 2007; The Smith Family, 2008; ACMA 2009b). Maximising the benefits of SNS for these groups specifically requires addressing access and digital literacy. Yet, where access and skills are promoted, SNS and social media can enhance the interactions of marginalised young people with their teacher and increase their confidence in educational activities (Blanchard, et.al., 2007). Utilising different formats – for example, attaching a multi-media file or attaching clip art – enables individuals to articulate and explain themselves when faced with cultural, social, language or learning barriers (Blanchard et al 2007:32).

Informal knowledge and skills

SNS can facilitate learning and skill development outside formal learning environments by supporting peer-to-peer learning of knowledge and skills, collaboration, diverse cultural expression, the development of skills valued in the modern workplace, and a more empowered conception of citizenship (Ito, et.al., 2006; Jenkins, 2007:3). Furthermore, because of the high level of agency and personalisation involved, SNS can be particularly important learning spaces for young people who struggle in traditional educational settings (Green et.al 2007). Beyond substantial educational benefits studies have shown that SNS support informal learning interests and needs such as online marketing, advanced IT and creative content production as well as parenting methods for young parents (Notley, 2009:1220). Such studies show that SNS constitute new avenues for engaging young people in learning activities. When sharing content and creating/maintaining relationships young people engage in peer-based, self-directed and

interactive learning (accessible from outside the classroom), essential for engagement and deep learning (Ito et al 2008; Bartlett-Bragg 2003). Furthermore, the knowledge and skills young people are learning through SNS are directly relevant to the 'participatory web' in which 'user generated content is now integral in a rapidly developing online business model that capitalises on the social networks, creativity and knowledge of its users', and this means that new business models are expected to emerge (see OECD 2007). This has led some to claim that the learning enabled via SNS and social media will have a direct bearing on their economic futures (Notley, 2009).

There remain important questions about the extent to which informal learning enabled by SNS impacts upon formal learning. Although it cannot be presumed that daily use of technology outside of formal educational contexts translates into meaningful use for learning (Kennedy et al, 2008), SNS will provide the most benefit in terms of learning when there is integration of young people's SNS use in educational settings and their everyday lives.

Creativity

Rapid uptake of digital technologies have opened up unprecedented possibilities for amateur users to create and distribute content (Burgess, 2006) such that media 'users' have become 'produsers' (Bruns, 2008). User-generated content describes both the generation of 'original' creative content and 'remixed' content that creatively reworks or repurposes existing content. The interrelationship between SNS and social media has provided a key impetus (via platforms such as youtube.com and flickr.com) for the *sharing* of this self-generated content with broader networks. Young people in particular are more immersed in this participatory media environment than any other age-group. They now create and share their own 'small media' in their everyday communicative, creative and social activities.

Creative content sharing practices (such as blogs, animations, videos, photos and digital collages) form an increasingly integral part of young people's communicative exchange and play a significant role in young people's developing sense of identity and community. Creative content production and sharing _empowers_ individual young people through the following demonstrated benefits:
- fostering the development of literacy and technical skills (Notley and Tacchi, 2005);
- developing a sense of aspiration, personal achievement and self-worth, and fostering further creativity and self-expression (Notley and Tacchi, 2005) – all of which are key predictors of wellbeing;
- encouraging exploration and experimentation with new or different aspects of their identity (Coleman and Rowe 2005); and,
- reinforcing aspects of identity, such as ethnicity or cultural background (Blanchard, et.al. 2008:38).

The production and exchange of creative content also has demonstrated community-building effects. It can enhance the sense of community, belonging and connection that comes from a 'shared history' of exchanging creative content (Ito, 2005; Richardson, Third and MacColl, 2009). Collaborative creative production, in turn, gives rise to a stronger sense of connection with others and the formation of strong communities. These communities may be enduring or more ephemeral in nature. However, evidence suggests that, either way, they have positive impacts on participants' sense of community and connection (Richardson, Third and MacColl, 2009).

Individual Identity & Self-Expression

SNS are increasingly important for the expression of identity. This articulation is not merely narcissistic, but supports critical peer-based sociality (boyd 2007). Because SNS are essentially flexible and designed to promote individual customisation (Valtysson 2010:203) young people use SNS to experiment as well as find legitimacy for their political, ethnic, cultural or sexual identity (Coleman & Rowe 2005; Montgomery et al 2004:1; Hillier and Harrison, 2007). SNS can also reinforce parts of their identity, such as ethnicity or cultural background (Blanchard, et.al. 2008:38), particularly important for young people with chronic illness, newly-arrived migrants and minority ethnic groups (Stephens-Reicher, et.al. 2010).

SNS can provide young people with a space to work out identity and status, make sense of cultural cues and negotiate public life. Free from adult regulation young people's articulation and expression of various parts of their identity to their friends and others supports critical peer-based sociality (boyd 2007). Such processes of socialisation are essential for psychosocial development at a time when many young people are consolidating their identities, pulling up roots from their family, striving for independence and developing new types of relationships, including intimate ones (Berk 2007; Cobb 1995).

Strengthening Interpersonal Relationships

Young people's use of SNS is important for the strengthening and development of social relationships, particularly as the online and offline worlds converge.

Strengthening existing relationships
Having positive interpersonal relationships is an important predictor of wellbeing (Hartup & Stevens, 1999) and can buffer individuals from many of the key stressors that characterise the transition from childhood to adulthood (Bukowski, 2001; Hartup, 2000). Internet use, generally, has been found to strengthen young people's existing interpersonal relationships (Valentine & Holloway, 2002; ACMA 2009:8; Besley 2008; Gross, 2004; Subrahmanyam, Kraut, Greenfield, &

Gross, 2000; Valkenburg & Peter, 2006). Email, instant messaging and social networking can address new barriers young people may face to forming and maintaining positive social relationships. These barriers can include lack of safe, accessible and welcoming public places to gather, limited transport to get there, and time free of structured activities such as school and sport. SNS challenge these barriers because they are accessible 24/7, from different physical locations and via different technologies (eg. computer, mobile device) (boyd 2007; Sefton-Green & Buckingham 1996). Furthermore, SNS play a critical role in overcoming the impact that high levels of mobility and complexity can have on long-term relationships. For example, studies have found that SNS helps young people who have recently transitioned from high-school to university to develop new relationships while maintaining their high-school friendships. In particular, those students with lower levels of satisfaction with university life and lower levels of self-esteem benefited the most from active use of Facebook (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007). Indeed, some forms of online social networking, such as instant messaging, usually involve much smaller groups of participants (often one-to-one communication) and are primarily used to maintain existing friendship networks (Grinter & Palen, 2004).

SNS also play an important role in young people's development and exploration of intimate relationships (boyd 2007; Berk 2007; Cobb 1995). Once contact between young people in an intimate relationship outside of school hours usually occurred on the family phone which was shared and regulated by parents. Now SNS, along with the mobile phone, have provided a space in which this communication can occur (Livingstone 2008; Sprecher 2009).

Developing New Interpersonal Relationships
Most research has focused on the role SNS play in the maintaining and strengthening of existing offline relationships. This research often suggests that those relationships which occur solely online, while important, are 'weaker' (Donath & Boyd 2004). However, for some young people, particularly those who are marginalised or otherwise socially isolated, online relationships provided a significant, and sometimes the only, opportunity for such socialisation. As a study of SNS for young people who suffer chronic illness and/or disability demonstrates, not only did it provide the opportunity to develop such friendships but participants described these friendships as 'true friends' that were amongst their most dependable and enduring (Third and Richardson, 2010: 32). This ability to connect with others with shared values, views, needs or experiences, can assist young people experiencing marginalisation to identify potential supportive connections in their local community (Munt, Basset & O'Riordan 2002:135). Another study demonstrated how Facebook helped young people with lower levels of social skills develop friendships online that then translated offline (Valkenburg, Peter & Schouten 2006).

Convergence of online and offline spaces
The debate over whether SNS only foster existing relationships or wether they are an important facilitator of new relationships is based on an assumed distinction between face-to-face and online communication. There is increasing evidence that young people experience 'online' and 'offline' social worlds as 'mutually constituted' (Holloway and Valentine, 2003) and flexibly

combine a number of modes of techno-social interaction (Richardson, Third and MacColl, 2007). Indeed, young people are increasingly engaging simultaneously in online and offline social networking. For example, multi-player gaming has a long tradition of combining online and offline interactions of players with internet cafes and LAN parties providing such spaces (Beavis & Charles 2007)[v]. While there has been little research it appears that young people often work collaboratively in the online space through SNS, creating or commenting on YouTube videos or other such activities, while physically co-located. Young people not only consider their online and offline worlds as one but actually combine the two in a physical and temporal sense. This insight is further emphasised by research demonstrating that the potential of SNS for promoting social inclusion depends upon finding ways of bridging online communication and other means of social networking.:

> "Approaches to promoting social inclusion that rely solely on virtual communities are ill-advised... Successful approaches usually combine online and face-to-face networking." (Warschauer, 2004: 162)

Sense of Belonging and Collective Identity

SNS play a significant role in the formation of new forms of 'collective identity'. For example, studies have found that SNS can help young people who are sexually and gender diverse to meet people and learn from each other, creating the sense of belonging to a broader community (Harris 2004; Hillier and Harrison 2007; Munt, Basset and O'Riordan 2002). This sense of belonging and acceptance can mean that young people who may be more vulnerable to isolation – such as those with chronic illness or a disability – often remain members of an online community long after their initial impetus is gone (Richardson and Third, 2009).

Content sharing plays a major role in cultivating belonging and a sense of collective identity. Sharing written, visual or audio content on SNS that represents or portrays an individual or community experience invites others to engage and relate. Ito and Okabe (2005) use the term 'ambient co-presence' to explain this phenomenon: an ongoing visual access to a small-scale communication cluster (or 'community') via spontaneous and everyday images uploaded to a collaborative media space. Such a mode of 'sharing' and 'connection' does not require text-based or real-time communication and can also mitigate feelings of social isolation (Blanchard et.al. 2008: 40).

Strengthening & Building Communities

Research shows that SNS can facilitate a sense of connectedness, community and belonging. The opportunity to express oneself creatively, explore and experiment with identity and the

production − as well as consumption − of online content is central to the way that SNS strengthens and builds communities (Coleman and Rowe 2005; Montgomery 2007). People use these services regularly because:

> "...of the experiences they find there, not because of the spaces themselves… The ongoing attraction… is the community – the people that use the space." (Johnson, Levine & Smith 2009)

According to Robert Plan an online community can be defined as 'a collective group of entities, individuals or organisations that come together either temporarily or permanently through an electronic medium to interact in a common problem or interest space' (Plan, 2004:54). With functions such as Facebook's 'Groups' and 'Fan' pages, or Twitter's 'hash tags', SNS allow young people to connect with others over shared interests.

Civic Engagement & Political Participation

SNS constitute new spaces for civic engagement and political participation including information sharing and bringing together new networks for action utilising email, user-generated content and other networking practices (Montgomery 2007; Vromen 2007; 2008). Studies in the US find that 37% of 18 – 29 year olds use blogs and SNS for political or civic engagement (Smith et.al. 2009). Political candidates are increasingly utilising SNS and social media, as are advocacy and issue-orientated groups. SNS are being used for discussion, organisation and mobilisation as part of emerging political discourse in young people's everyday life (Kann 2007). Although focused on voting, campaigns such as Rock the Vote, The Hip Hop Summit Action Network, Citizen Change and Voces del Pueblo are examples of the way that social networking is embedded in new forms of community and political organising and campaigning (Montgomery, 2008: 30).

For young people who do not consider their participation in civic or issue-based activities as 'political' in the traditional or institutional sense, SNS are considered more important than 'civic sites' (Collin, 2009: 204). Social networking services, such as www.myspace.com are used to find out what other people are doing by connecting with individuals with similar interests, existing campaigns or disseminating information about their own projects (Collin, 2010). Young people are creating 'new participatory communities by and for their peers' (Harris, 2008:488) and the new forms of self-expression enabled via SNS allows for 'generating public selves in their own ways' in what boyd claims is a way to 'write themselves and their community into being' (Harris 2008:489; boyd 2007:13-14). Furthermore, organisations and services are increasingly viewing social networking practices as the next step in youth participation in government and community decision making (Collin, 2010), though there are still questions as to the extent to which SNS operate as virtual public spheres, enabling and fostering deliberation and direct participation (Vromen, 2008). However, the public sphere defined as "a network for communicating information

and points of view" (Habermas, 1996) permits the recognition of forms of creative digital expression via SNS as civic engagement (Burgess, et.al., 2006).

There is a significant body of academic work on cybercitizenship which take into consideration the performative, participatory and creative dimensions of current digital practices that could enhance conceptualisations of cybercitizenship currently utilised in policy and practice.

Wellbeing

While research specifically on SNS use needs to be conducted, it has been argued that SNS functionality has a key role to play in strengthening social connectedness, self-efficacy, general knowledge and/or life skills and is critical for the promotion of young people's overall mental health and wellbeing (Boase et al 2006; Burns, et.al. 2007; Burns et.al, 2008; Burns & Morey, 2009). The personalisation of SNS profiles is not only important to young people's relationship with others but is positively associated with the individual's sense of self-efficacy or personal agency (Notley & Tachhi, 2005). Young person's sense of 'ownership' over the online space also enhances their sense of empowerment and accomplishment which reinforces the sense of belonging and attachment to community (Third and Richardson, 2010).

There is a demonstrated positive relationship between young people's use of social networking services and self-esteem (Valkenburg, Peter and Schouten, 2006). It is also argued that a sense of community and belonging has the potential to promote young people's resilience, giving them the ability to successfully adapt to change and stressful events (Oliver et al 2006:1). This is an area that requires more large-scale research, particularly considering the over-emphasis within the public realm on the negative psychological effects of SNS and social media. However, overall, it appears that the social connections developed and fostered through SNS play an important role in promoting young people's wellbeing (Berson 2003; Campbell 2005; Gross, Juvonen & Gable 2002).

Part 3. Conclusions and Future Directions

Social Networking Services (SNS) are significant players in the Web 2.0 environment, transforming communication practices, opening new spaces and processes of socialisation and impacting upon traditional social structures. These effects are particularly relevant for the most frequent users of SNS – young people. This new environment poses certain challenges and, like any setting for social interaction, has some inherent risks. However, this review suggests that

these challenges and risks have been over-emphasised in recent years both in popular media and social research. Through increased internet and media literacy – ensuring all young people develop the skills to critically understand, analyse and create media content – these challenges can be overcome and risks mitigated in a way that ensures the many benefits of SNS can be realised. In other words, by maximising the benefits of SNS, whether it be their role in delivering educational outcomes, or facilitating supportive relationships, identity formation, or a sense of belonging and resiliency, many of the risks of online interaction, such as cyber-bullying, privacy breaches and predation, can be minimised. Strategies to this end must be underpinned by best practice evidence and more research should be undertaken to ensure that emerging practices and effects of SNS are understood and responded to.

This review of the benefits of SNS also points to some potential opportunities to extend and improve conceptualisations of 'cybercitizenship' in policy and practice. Firstly, the concept of cybercitizenship, and its associated policies and programs, are almost exclusively focused on children and young people and therefore speak to what young people should 'become' rather than what they already 'are'. It implies deficiency and fails to recognise that young people (and indeed children) are often more engaged, knowledgeable and proactive when it comes to safe and responsible online practices. Cybercitizenship, therefore, is a concept that would more usefully be applied to the community as a whole, rather than as a set of policies that target young people as requiring protecting - or protection from – in a digital landscape. Indeed, the Australian Communications and Media Authority has recognised that cybercitizenship policy should address a broader audience – acknowledging that adults would benefit from initiatives in online safety that have previously targeted children and young people (ACMA, 2009).

As Australia moves into the future, the intergenerational divide is likely to become a key social issue. It is widely acknowledged that Australia needs a comprehensive plan for dealing with the effects of an ageing population. This planning needs to address intergenerational communication practices. As we have suggested, the rise of social networking has led to the emergence of new patterns of communication and social connection between young people. If we don't act to enhance intergenerational communication, we risk generating a culture structured by a digital/communication divide between young people, their parents and older members of the community. It is vital that that we harness the potential for intergenerational communication facilitated by social networking services. This will require a concerted effort to educate older Australians about SNS, and enable them to understand how young people identify and respond to the risks and opportunities they present.

The second insight is that the positioning of cybercitizenship within an online risk-management paradigm (particularly within policy) is inherently limiting given the substantial range and substantive benefits associated with online practices. This paper finds that the benefits of social networking are largely associated with the participatory nature of the contemporary digital environment, yet participation in creative content production, dissemination and consumption is largely overlooked in cybercitizenship frameworks. Incorporating academic work on

cybercitizenship and thus broadening the notion of cybercitizenship to encompass the ways in which people are engaging online to express themselves, challenge and create views on society and their place within it requires recognition that their online practices may challenge commonly held notions about childhood, youth, gender, ethnicity and so on. Importantly, these considerations should be informed by young people's own experiences and perspectives. It may also present the need to incorporate new kinds of ethical and legal information relating to 'citizen' rights and responsibilities.

Finally, this discussion of the benefits of SNS illuminates the ways in which the 'online' and 'offline' worlds are mutually constituted. However, cybercitizenship as a concept has a tendency to reinforce notions that there is a distinction between computer and web-mediated communication on the one hand and all other modes of communication on the other. If it is to retain relevance and deliver benefits to the community, our understanding of cybercitizenship must be more holistic, to fully encompass and resonate across all of the settings in which we live our lives - be that home, school, work, our local communities or our communities of interest.

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