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How r u? – the social side of technology



They've been dubbed the "Facebook Generation" – a huge swathe of people who don't give a second thought about communicating with others online. In broad terms, these disciples of social networking are young and technically literate. And they love nothing more than sharing the ins and outs of their life with their friends via social networking websites.

But spare a thought for those who have yet to create their 'hello-world-this-is-me' page. They are often left scratching their heads in bemusement at the whole idea of living part of their lives online. Not least, because many are concerned about the consequences of revealing so much private information.

It's certainly a subject that has kept the media busy. They've followed every step in the rapid advancement in social networking. And not all of the reporting has been positive.

"Some of the coverage has focused on how it [social networking] is a degenerative communications medium," said Dr Kathleen Richardson from Cambridge University's Department of Anthropology.

"Reports have suggested that it is self-indulgent, time-wasting and has a negative impact on social interactions. But our research has been found to disagree with this, especially among younger users."

Rather than diminishing social interaction, the research - carried out in conjunction with BT - found that social networking offers people more choice on how they do continue relationships. It doesn't damage close relationships such as those with partners or parents, although many of the younger users in the study did not want their parents to be their "friends" online. What's more, it helps to bring people together and cement relationships.

"We found that Facebook adds to the repertoire of communications media that people use, with its application for different types of relationship very much evident, depending on the quality, longevity, intimacy and regular face-to-face contact nature of the existing relationship," said Dr Richardson.

Regular contact

"Social networking allows people to be social by providing a means of regular contacts and updates, but also by giving more choice to the users in the way they communicate."

For example, one woman who took part in the research explained how Facebook allowed her to re-connect with an old school friend. As a result of this initial contact, she has rekindled her friendship.

"In this case and many like it we found social networking not to be a singular source of communication but one which can augment personal relationships," said Dr Richardson.

What's more, it's not just the younger generation that is hooked on the likes of Facebook. The research found that the appeal of social networking is spreading to an older audience. And for exactly the same reasons as those that attracted today's users. That's because it enables people to keep in contact with old and new friends. It enables them to be involved in their lives, despite geographical distance keeping them apart physically.

But social networking sites are not just about communication. They have also become an online "diary" of contacts, friends, phone numbers and addresses.

"These sites can act as an archive for relationships," said Sue Hessey principal research professional at BT Group's Chief Technology Office who worked on the research alongside Dr Richardson.

"With high levels of mobility - especially in student and working populations who have 'home friends', 'work friends', 'College friends' - this is especially important. One of those taking part in the study referred to Facebook as a 'back-up' for when they are deleted from their current university e-mail systems."

New level

Despite the rapid take-up of social networking it largely remains a computer-based activity. While this looks set to continue the future for social networking looks increasingly mobile. Being able to get the same experience via a small screen – compared to a PC – remains a challenge. But once this can be done, it looks set to take social networking to a whole new intimate and private level.

BT's research into social networking is part of its ongoing work into how people communicate. Although part of a much broader body of work, Sue is convinced that social networking sites are a positive development – especially among those regular users who consider it to be a vital element of everyday life and interaction.

"We think that the social networking phenomenon - or their future equivalents or variations - is here to stay and influence more of people's lives and the way they interact with each other," she said.

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