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You're Not Alone: The Networked Life

Marissa Martin [Policy Horizons Canada]

Do you feel anxious if you've accidentally left your smart phone at home? Have you ever felt that something hadn't really happened until you posted it on Facebook? If you belong to 'Generation C', those born after 1990, you probably answer 'yes' to both. For this generation, growing up in the digital era, being connected is everything. They live "online" for the majority of their day (Booz & Company, 2010).

According to a survey with young professionals from around the

Generation C – connect, communicate, and change.

world, one-third of respondents claimed the internet is as important as food, water, and air; half said it is a close second (Cisco, 2011). As these digital natives take centre stage, their outlook will greatly impact how we communicate, and how we work. Will it become the norm to manage multiple identities, to multitask constantly using our mobile devices, and to be connected daily with people from all over the world? It has already started...

IDENTITY MASH-UP

Who am I online and in person? Traditionally, people find identity to be a challenging question. Especially for youth as they search for who they aspire to be as a person and how they fit into society. Are you a public

servant sitting comfortably in your cubicle working on the issue of the day? Or are you an

online soldier as you take your "Call of Duty"? Or are you a mommy blogger sharing your deepest insights on parenting? How about: all the above! Technology has added a complexity that we have never had to consider before. In Sherry Turkle's book, *Alone Together*, the idea of the "Life Mix" is introduced (2011: 160). The array of social media platforms that are at our finger tips is expanding. Every platform requires that you create your profile – your identity in that virtual space. This new "Life Mix" is an updated version of the personal portfolio, incorporating your online and offline identities.

By 2020, Generation C will make up 40% of the population in the US, Europe, and the BRIC countries and 10% of the rest of the world.

Your identities could vary depending on how you would like to present yourself within a space. Mobile communication is the main portal that is allowing this to occur seamlessly. Are we experiencing a shift to “multi-living”?

We can use our avatars to help manage everyday tensions and facilitate communication; they can even be perceived as our “better selves” as they develop distinct personalities that may differ from our “real selves”. The younger generations will be significantly more comfortable with the concept of shifting between multiple online and offline identities since they are completely submerged into the digital life as a day-to-day normalcy.

CHALLENGES OF THE LIFE MIX (TURKLE, 2011):

- Difficulty keeping up the pace to maintain online presence on multiple platforms;
- Experiencing presentation anxiety as you worry how others will perceive you online;
- Burdened by the inability to leave the past behind; and
- Facing a “spillover effect” as actions in the virtual world start effecting life in the real world.

DIGITALLY DISTRACTED

How is technology affecting our relationships with others? In their book, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*, Jackson and McKibben describe today as the land of distraction. With amazing amounts of information just a click away, our attention is easily scattered. We are finding it increasingly difficult to pause, reflect, and deeply connect (Jackson and McKibben, 2008). Turkle reports that an analysis performed in 2010

has shown that our youth are exhibiting a dramatic decline in interest in interacting with others in person (2011: 293). With texting or posting capabilities right in your mobile phone – why call anyone or go through the trouble of coordinating a face-to-face get-together? Turkle highlighted the fact that respondents felt phone calls were intrusive on other people’s time. We are also seeing a shift within the home. Parents and their children have a new challenge. In the not-so-distant past, children had to adjust to both parents being in the workforce and they were referred to as the “latch-key” kids. But now, parents might be physically present but mentally elsewhere, as they are constantly distracted by their mobile devices or other technologies. Constant connectedness is also affecting adolescent autonomy. Turkle states that at some point, youth need to experience separation from not only their parents, but from each other. It is difficult for them to escape new group demands (2011: 174). How will this continue to evolve the traditional socialization process as this generation continues to take a strong hold on society?

GET CLOSE AND COMFORTABLE

These digital natives are already experiencing days of non-stop socialization – online (2011). Cisco reports that 9 out of 10 college students and young professionals have a Facebook account. The youth today are

living a fully networked life: they are networked, their friends are

Average person in 2020 will live in a web of 200-300 contacts, maintained daily through a variety of channels.

networked, and their parents are networked too. As Generation C grows up, their networks will only



continue to expand beyond traditional groups of family, friends, and work colleagues to include extended friends, online acquaintances, and anonymous interest groups (Booz & Company, 2010). But will their core circle of contacts remain small and intimate or will this too expand (The Economist, 2009)? In 2020, this generation will start to celebrate their 30th birthdays. They will be well into the workforce and will be working differently. At this point, they will also be the future leaders or already getting their feet wet in entry-level management positions. The societal landscape is on the verge of a significant change.

ARE WE READY?

- How will it change the way public servants do their jobs?
- How will the dependency on technology affect who we are as people and how we perceive ourselves?
- How do we leverage the creativity from each generation to better serve Canadians?
- How will the 'Generation C' adapt and transform public and private institutions established by their predecessors?
- Will digital technology widen the social and economic gap across generations? If so, how will public and private institutions foster an environment of intergenerational cohesion?

Many challenges lie ahead as we continue to experiment and feel our way through this new digital terrain. In closing, we should update our Facebook status: "To boldly go where no one has gone before."

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