Teenagers' Online Question Asking and Answering Behavior

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ABSTRACT

In this position paper, we explain why teenagers are likely to differ from adults in their use of social media to ask and answer questions. We describe an ongoing study in which we use surveys, interviews and focus groups in two high schools to understand question asking and answering among American teens.

INTRODUCTION

Teenagers are notoriously active users of social media: in 2011, 95% of American teens were online and 80% of them used social network sites (SNS) [13]. Ito et al. [6] demonstrated that young people use social media not only for identity exploration and socialization (friendship-driven activities), but also to engage in learning and exploration about the world around them (interest-driven activities). Simultaneously, research on question asking has begun to explore both how people make use of their online social networks to find information they need, and who is likely to engage in such practices. In an ongoing study of teenagers, we are exploring how the increasing reach of online social networks and other social media into teens' daily lives plays a role in their online social information seeking practices.

boyd [5] has examined the characteristics of social network sites as "networked publics" that together create a peculiar kind of social experience. She identifies persistence, searchability, replicability, and invisible audiences as four features of networked publics and inspected youth engagement with social media within this context [5]. These four characteristics of networked publics also offer a compelling framework for understanding question asking activity. When informal information exchanges are *persistent* and *searchable* online, they can become information resources long beyond the timeframe of utility for the initial asker and answerer. Because they are *replicable*, such exchanges can also be broadcast and amplified across many social groups. Finally, *invisible*

audiences may contribute to the sense that asking a question is a useful behavior in the first place: "I can't think of who, but someone out there must know."

Morris et al. [15] demonstrated that adults sometimes prefer asking questions on SNSs rather than social Q&A sites or search engines, particularly when subjective information was requested and when questions required answers tailored to the asker. Study participants also reported that, when asking questions of their social networks, they had more trust in the people answering the questions and they received secondary benefits such as emotional support, creating social awareness, or having fun in the process.

We don't know whether, how many, or which teenagers use social media to ask questions of their peers or other social contacts. Lampe et al. [12] found that among adult Facebook users, the likelihood of using the site to find information was negatively correlated with age—in other words, younger participants were more likely to use Facebook to ask questions than older participants. This points to teenagers as a group likely to ask questions.

We also don't know what teenagers' online question asking and answering behaviors are like. In this position paper, we examine the ways that teenage life provides a unique context for social media use and explore some ideas about what this might mean for question asking and answering behaviors.

TEENAGE LIFE: SOME CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING QUESTION-ASKING BEHAVIORS

Teenage life is different from adult life. Different kinds of social, cultural and biological constraints and needs give rise to different experiences and different behaviors. Differences that affect online experiences include the fact that socialization and identity formation comprise much of their time, that their activities are subject to monitoring and regulation by adults and institutions, and that these factors make them particularly vulnerable to predation—whether by ill-intentioned criminals or, more commonly, those who wish to sell them something [5]. The simultaneous experience of growth and vulnerability that characterize "teenagerhood" make youth experiences of mediated social interaction an object of widespread interest.

Agosto and Hughes-Hassell [2, 3] have examined the everyday information seeking practices of urban American

teenagers and found that non-academic question asking and broader information seeking activities served to support teens' growing self-awareness and their developing comprehension of the physical and social worlds, while supporting healthy maturation into adulthood. They identified 28 discrete categories of youth information needs.

Ito et al. [6] suggest that the kind of activities youth are engaged in at a given time—either friendship-driven or interest-driven—has a profound effect on the ways they communicate online and what they communicate about. This work demonstrated that friendship-driven participation on sites such as MySpace and Facebook largely involved learning about the opinions and values of peers, whereas interest-driven participation involved the development of specialized forms of expertise within niche knowledge communities [6].

CONJECTURES, HYPOTHESES AND WONDERINGS

The strength and nature of social ties often helps explain online interactions; however, in the case of question asking and answering, findings are still unclear. Some research shows that people are exposed to and spread more novel information from weak ties due to their abundance [4]; however, other research has found that strong ties provide higher quality answers to questions asked through status messages on Facebook [16]. Agosto, Abbas and Naughton [1] found that tech-savvy teens tend to use different types of media for communication with strong and weak ties, tending to favor large SNSs for communication and interaction with weaker ties, and texting for communication and interaction with stronger ties. We think that the *kind* of information being sought via social media will likely also play a role in how this plays out for teenagers. Ito et al. [6] suggested that teens are more willing to interact with adults in online "interest-driven" activities and peers in "friendship-driven" ones. This suggests that interest-driven and friendship-driven information needs may be correlated with different question-asking practices; for example, the strength and kind of ties that yield highly valued answers may depend on what kind of information is being sought.

Another factor that may play a role in teens' question asking behaviors is fluency with online environments where question asking can take place. Although most teenagers are online, they vary significantly in their Internet experiences and skills [7, 9, 10, 11, 14]. Research also shows that Web-use skills influence the types of activities young adults engage in online [7, 9]; therefore, we include an established measure of Internet skills in our analyses [8] to explore the relationship between Internet skill and question asking behaviors.

DATA COLLECTION IN PROGRESS

We are using a mixed methods approach to collect data from two groups of teens. One group attends a science magnet high school in a large urban area. The other group attends a suburban high school outside of a major metropolitan area in a different region of the country. These populations were selected for cultural, ethnic, and geographic diversity.

Up to 400 participants will complete a survey of social media use, with an emphasis on question asking and answering practices. In the survey, we borrow techniques from Morris et al. [15] to collect a corpus of questions that teens have asked online. We then use Agosto and Hughes-Hassell's [2, 3] 28 categories of information needs to collect more structured data on question asking practices. Finally, we adapted scales from Lampe et al. [12] and included Hargittai and Hsieh's [8] internet skills scale to create a dataset that can be used to compare our sample with others'.

We will conduct individual interviews and focus groups with up to 50 students at each location. Participants will be selected to represent a diversity of practices. Using a semi-structured approach, and basing questions off of survey responses, we will discuss participants' question asking and answering practices, their information needs, and their technology choices and preferences. This will enable us to both contextualize survey data and to support a description of social search activity in terms of goals, information assessment practices, and technology use.

Data collection is ongoing through May 2013.

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