

Critique of Teenagers and Social Networking by Clive Thompson

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Introduction

Clive Thompson's 2013 Guardian article, "Teenagers and Social Networking—It Might Actually Be Good for Them," challenges a recurring form of technological panic. Rather than accepting the claim that online communication automatically destroys young people's privacy, writing ability, empathy, or [face-to-face relationships](#), Thompson compares public fears with the evidence then available. His central argument is not that social networking is harmless. It is that adults often interpret unfamiliar teenage behavior through exaggerated assumptions, and that digital communication can extend friendship, writing, creativity, and social participation. (Thompson)

The article remains useful because it asks readers to separate evidence from generational anxiety. However, the social-media environment has changed substantially since 2013. Smartphones are more central to adolescent life, algorithmic recommendation is more powerful, platforms collect more data, image-based comparison is widespread, and harmful content can reach users rapidly. Current public-health authorities therefore take a more cautious position than Thompson's optimistic framing. A fair critique should recognize the article's strengths while updating its conclusions: social media can benefit teenagers, but outcomes depend on content, design, intensity, vulnerability, supervision, and the quality of young people's offline lives. (boyd)

Summary of Thompson's Argument

Thompson begins by presenting familiar warnings. Critics claim that online socializing produces a shallow culture, reduces the ability to communicate in person, exposes teenagers to sexual content, encourages aggression, and weakens serious writing. He places these concerns within a longer history in which new communication technologies provoke fear among older generations.

He then uses research and observation to question the most dramatic claims. Teenagers who communicate online often continue to socialize offline. Digital messages can supplement rather than replace friendships. Young people make decisions about privacy even when their idea of privacy differs from that of adults. Informal writing does not necessarily prevent complex school writing; frequent digital communication may increase the amount of writing teenagers do.

The article also emphasizes that teenagers use online spaces because their physical freedom is often restricted. When adults limit unsupervised movement in public places, social networks become places

where young people gather. This insight shifts responsibility from technology alone to the social conditions surrounding it.

Strengths of the Article

Thompson's greatest strength is his rejection of simple technological determinism. Technology does not act on every teenager in the same way. A messaging application can support a close friendship, enable bullying, help a marginalized teenager find community, interrupt sleep, or facilitate collaborative schoolwork. The outcome depends on how the tool is designed and used.

The article also correctly identifies generational panic as a weak form of evidence. Adults have previously worried that novels, telephones, comic books, television, video games, and texting would damage young people. The fact that earlier fears were exaggerated does not prove that current concerns are false, but it warns against treating discomfort with novelty as proof of harm.

Thompson's discussion of privacy is also more sophisticated than the claim that teenagers do not care. Research from Pew in the same period showed that young people managed audiences, deleted material, used coded language, and selected platforms to avoid unwanted observation. Teenagers may care more about parents, teachers, peers, and social reputation than about abstract institutional data collection. That is still privacy behavior, even if it does not address every risk. (Pew Research Center)

Limitations of the Original Evidence

The article draws on studies available in 2013, when platform design and usage patterns differed from those of the mid-2020s. Evidence based on Facebook status updates and text messaging cannot automatically explain short-form video feeds, influencer economies, algorithmic personalization, disappearing content, location sharing, or continuous smartphone access.

Some of Thompson's claims combine correlation and causation. If teenagers who text frequently also socialize more in person, online communication may strengthen friendship, but socially active teenagers may simply use every available channel more often. Observational studies cannot fully separate these explanations.

The article also tends to respond to extreme critics. Refuting the claim that social media destroys an entire generation is easier than evaluating more specific harms. A platform does not need to eliminate face-to-face communication to contribute to sleep loss, body dissatisfaction, harassment, distraction, or compulsive checking among some users.

Social Connection and Belonging

Social media can help teenagers maintain friendships, coordinate activities, share interests, and receive emotional support. It can be particularly valuable for young people who are geographically isolated, disabled, chronically ill, questioning identity, or unable to find peers with similar experiences in their immediate environment. Creative communities can teach art, music, coding, writing, and activism.

Online contact can also strengthen existing relationships rather than replacing them. A message after school, a group chat, or shared media can extend conversations begun in person. The distinction between “online” and “real” friendship is often misleading because the same people move between both settings.

However, connection is not identical to wellbeing. A teenager may receive many notifications while feeling excluded from meaningful relationships. Public measures such as follower counts and likes can transform social approval into continuous comparison. The quality of interaction matters more than the mere amount of contact.

Mental Health and the Current Evidence

The U.S. Surgeon General’s advisory on social media and youth mental health concludes that social media presents both benefits and meaningful risks and that the evidence is not sufficient to declare it safe for children and adolescents. The advisory notes associations between heavy use and symptoms of depression and anxiety, while also emphasizing that effects vary. (Office of the U.S)

Current evidence does not support one universal statement that social media causes mental illness. Mental health influences use as well as being influenced by it. A lonely or depressed teenager may spend more time online, encounter different content, or seek support. Platform effects also differ according to age, gender, prior mental health, family support, and the type of engagement.

Active communication with supportive friends may have different effects from passive comparison, harassment, or repeated exposure to self-harm and eating-disorder content. Research and policy should therefore examine design features and experiences rather than only total screen hours.

Sleep, Attention, and Displacement

One of the clearest risks occurs when social-media use displaces sleep, physical activity, schoolwork, or face-to-face support. Nighttime notifications and fear of missing out can encourage teenagers to keep devices near the bed and interrupt rest. Sleep loss affects mood, learning, attention, and physical health.

Thompson was correct that young people can write complex digital messages, but frequent task switching can still disrupt sustained attention. The relevant question is not whether teenagers have lost the ability to read or write. It is whether platform design repeatedly interrupts activities that require concentration.

Time limits alone are an incomplete solution. Three hours spent creating art with friends is not equivalent to three hours spent receiving harassment. Families and researchers should consider timing, purpose, emotional effect, and what the activity replaces.

Privacy, Data, and Platform Power

The original article focuses mainly on social privacy: who among parents, teachers, or peers can see a post. Contemporary privacy concerns also include behavioral profiling, location data, advertising, facial recognition, and recommendation systems. A teenager can configure an account as private while the platform still collects extensive information.

Young people cannot be expected to manage risks that are difficult even for adults to understand. Long privacy policies and complex settings shift responsibility onto users while companies control defaults and data systems. The National Academies has recommended stronger industry standards, transparency, and protections against harassment. (National Academies of Sciences)

Digital literacy remains important. Teenagers should understand that screenshots, backups, and data retention can outlast disappearing messages. They should know how to block, report, document abuse, secure accounts, and seek help. But education should supplement, not replace, safer product design.

Sexting and Moral Interpretation

The original response treats any reported sexting as evidence of broad moral damage. This interpretation is too simple. Sexual image sharing among minors creates serious legal, privacy, coercion, and exploitation risks, especially when images are distributed without consent. It should be addressed through safety education, consent, supportive reporting, and proportionate law rather than shame.

Percentages for sending and receiving images should not automatically be added together because the groups may overlap. Nor does receiving an unwanted image mean the recipient chose the behavior. Research must distinguish consensual communication, coercion, harassment, and nonconsensual distribution.

Adults should avoid responses that punish the victim of image-based abuse or discourage young people from seeking help. Prevention requires clear boundaries and accountability for coercive

conduct.

Writing and Communication

Thompson argues that digital technology has increased the amount and complexity of young people's writing. This point remains persuasive. Teenagers write messages, captions, comments, fan fiction, game discussions, scripts, and collaborative documents for real audiences. They frequently adapt tone and vocabulary across contexts.

Informal abbreviations do not prove an inability to write formally. Skilled communicators switch registers. Schools should teach students when evidence, structure, revision, and formal grammar are required while recognizing the rhetorical skills developed through digital participation.

At the same time, platforms reward speed and reaction. Longer reasoning can be reduced to slogans, and misinformation can spread through emotional content. Digital writing is therefore an opportunity that requires instruction in verification, source evaluation, and respectful disagreement.

Cyberbullying, Harassment, and Unequal Risk

Online harassment can follow a teenager across time and place, reach large audiences, and remain searchable. Marginalized young people may encounter racism, misogyny, homophobia, religious hatred, disability abuse, or coordinated attacks. Thompson's broad defense of networking does not fully address these power differences.

Schools and families need procedures that protect targets without demanding that they simply leave the platform. Companies should provide effective reporting, limit repeated contact from blocked accounts, and reduce algorithmic amplification of abuse. Responses should also recognize that online and offline bullying are often connected.

A Balanced Response to Thompson

Thompson was right to reject the claim that social networking inevitably creates antisocial, illiterate, privacy-indifferent teenagers. His emphasis on evidence, friendship, creativity, and generational panic remains valuable. The article also anticipated later research showing that online effects are not uniform.

His argument is less adequate as a guide to the current platform environment. The scale of data collection, algorithmic feeds, continuous smartphone access, and commercial attention design requires stronger safeguards. Moderation should not mean leaving every family to negotiate alone. Schools, governments, researchers, and technology companies share responsibility.

Practical Principles for Healthy Use

Healthy use begins with conversation rather than surveillance alone. Caregivers can ask how online experiences make the teenager feel, which accounts are supportive, and what interferes with sleep or concentration. Device-free sleep periods, protected study time, and shared family expectations can create boundaries without treating technology as an enemy.

Young people should have trusted adults to approach after harassment, coercion, or exposure to harmful content. Adults should respond calmly enough to keep communication open. Immediate confiscation as the only response may teach a teenager to conceal future problems.

Platforms should use privacy-protective defaults for minors, provide age-appropriate design, reduce unwanted contact, and give independent researchers access to study effects. The burden cannot rest solely on adolescent self-control when products are designed to maximize engagement.

Conclusion

Clive Thompson's article offers an important correction to exaggerated claims that social networking automatically destroys teenage social life. Online communication can strengthen friendship, creativity, writing, identity exploration, and access to support. Yet evidence accumulated since 2013 also demonstrates meaningful risks involving sleep, harassment, harmful content, body image, compulsive use, and commercial data practices. The strongest conclusion is neither celebration nor panic. Social media is a social environment whose effects depend on its design, the activity taking place, the teenager's circumstances, and the support surrounding use. Thompson's demand for evidence should be retained, while his optimism should be updated with stronger attention to platform responsibility and adolescent health.

Works Cited

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