

TeenSites.com

A Field Guide to the New Digital Landscape

Executive Summary

For complete report go to
www.cme.org

A Report from the
Center for Media Education

Center for Media Education (CME)
Kathryn C. Montgomery, Ph.D., President

The Center for Media Education (CME) is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to creating a quality electronic media culture for children and youth. CME's cutting-edge studies on the new-media marketplace have had major impacts on a number of key public policy decisions during the past decade. Its documentation of online marketing and data collection practices targeted at children established the groundwork for the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). CME's *Research and Public Education Initiative on New Media, Children and Youth* is designed to stimulate research on digital media and serve as a clearinghouse on research and policy developments for academics, industry, the public and policymakers. The organization's current research and public education project, "Youth as E-Citizens: The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement," will help to ensure that the Internet serves young people as a bridge to community and civic engagement. CME's funders include the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Atlantic Philanthropies.

Executive Summary

Teens growing up today are at the center of the technological explosion that has transformed the media system:

- More than half of all Americans were hooked up to the Internet by the end of 2000, and within the next four years that number is expected to grow to 85 percent.
- Nearly nine out of ten American homes will soon be interactively wired.
- Most people will connect to the Internet through personal computers; but other devices, including digital TVs, game consoles, portable devices, and next-generation digital cable set-top boxes, will increasingly provide a link.

In many ways, teens are the *defining users* of this digital media culture:

- As “early adopters” of these technologies, teens are as comfortable growing up with digital media as their parents’ generation was with the telephone and TV.
- With nearly three-quarters of twelve- to seventeen-year-olds online, teens surpass adults in their use of chat, instant messaging, and other forms of Internet communications.
- Teens integrate interactive devices into their daily lives in unexpected, often inventive ways. Many teens already use the television and the computer simultaneously, far in advance of the so-called convergence of these two media.
- Teens’ increased personal spending power, combined with their technological savvy, have made them a particularly powerful target market for online businesses, generating a cornucopia of varied content and activities on the Web, tailored specifically to their interests.
- A host of new products is being created exclusively for teens, which may very well be the test market for the next generation of digital content and services.

Teenagers have embraced this new online world with great enthusiasm, responding eagerly to its invitation to share ideas, contribute content, and otherwise place their stamp on a media system that they themselves create and manage. Teens have also seized upon all manner of

electronic gadgets—from pagers to mobile phones to personal digital assistants (PDAs). And with the promise of Internet connectivity to all of these devices and others just around the corner, teens are marching into the future with the potential for unprecedented levels of communications and information retrieval at their fingertips. In the words of one industry expert, young people have not simply adopted digital media, they have *internalized* it.

The new digital media foster relationships with their audiences that constitute a significant departure from the ways in which teens have interacted with media in the past. The Internet allows teenagers to form communities with their peers, express themselves through writing and art, engage in social and political activism, and even earn money in the new “e-economy” of cyberspace. Many of the forms and much of the content of the online teen culture are attuned to the special developmental needs of adolescents, tapping into their desires to be independent of parents and family, to communicate with their peers, to try on new identities, and to express their opinions.

Yet while there has been substantial public debate about protecting children and teens from inappropriate and harmful content on the Internet, very little is really understood about the nature of the digital content and services created for and by teens—the actual Web sites where they spend so much time and to which they devote so much attention. As a consequence, even as this new medium is becoming a pervasive presence in teens’ lives, it remains largely under the radar of parents, scholars, and policymakers alike.

This report is designed to shed light on this new digital culture, and on the technological and economic forces that are shaping it. Our focus here is on the World Wide Web, which we see as the center of innovation and implementation for the new media system. The study provides an overview of popular teen Web sites, identifying the key features that characterize online content and activity for teens and analyzing the major industry trends that influence the design and direction of the new teen media culture. We did not set out to assess the impact of new media on teens; rather, our intention was to provide a “map” of this emerging media landscape, one that we hope will guide other researchers in their study of various aspects of it, and of the ways teens are interacting with it, in greater detail.

This was a qualitative study, aimed at assessing both the content and the context of the new teen media culture. Our research drew from a variety of sources, including trade publications and reports, interviews, and participation in industry meetings and conferences. In addition, we conducted an analysis of the Web sites themselves, using a combination of methods to create a core sample that would represent the most popular and prominent teen content areas. To gain an understanding of where this new culture may be heading, we also examined trends

in emerging media platforms such as wireless application protocol (WAP) portable devices and interactive television.

While much of our focus was on the online commercial content and services for teens, we also made a special effort to assess the civic promise of the Internet, by examining efforts outside the commercial sphere, where Web sites are being created under nonprofit auspices and, in some cases, by teens themselves.

During the period in which this study was conducted, the digital landscape itself underwent some major tectonic shifts. America Online's merger with Time Warner, which was finalized in January 2001, was only the most conspicuous example of what has emerged as a trend of media consolidation and convergence, one that will have profound implications for the future of the Internet. In the latter half of 2000, the economy of the Web plummeted, as venture capital quickly dried up amid projections of less-than-expected revenues. Hundreds of commercial Web sites folded, both well-known and obscure online ventures, including several of the teen sites that were part of our study. Despite these reconfigurations, major and minor, we believe that we have captured a reasonably accurate picture of the overall trends in this quickly changing environment.

Findings

Online Commercial Culture

The myriad activities that define much of the teen Web culture are deeply rooted in the business imperatives of the new digital economy. Even as online companies struggle to find workable revenue models in an uncertain economy, marketing and advertising are already fundamentally shaping the digital culture, creating new hybrid forms that blend communications, content, and commerce. Market research is proving to be one of the more promising business models, in some cases surpassing advertising and sponsorship as the key source of revenue.

What Teens Find on the Web

The online teen culture foregrounds entertainment over information. The lion's share of teen Web site content revolves around the popular culture that young people so avidly consume as well as the personal issues that tend to be foremost in their minds. Topping the list in our survey were music (found on 67.9 percent of the sites), film (54.3 percent), relationships (51.9 percent), advice (49.4 percent), and fashion (43.2 percent). At the other end of the spectrum were topics that appeared on only a small percentage of commercial sites: religion

(16 percent), travel (11.1 percent), food (11.1 percent), voluntarism (11.1 percent), the environment (6.2 percent), and nature (2.5 percent).

The popular enterprises that make up this new media culture offer a variety of engaging, interactive activities. Many provide a package of “sticky content” and services designed to serve as the doorway to the Internet and the daily hub of teen online experience.

Bolt.com is typical of popular teen sites. It offers a highly charged, vibrant, pulsating menu divided into 15 broad topics, or “channels” (Advice, Art & Writing, Cars, College, Dealing & Health, Drugs, Gaming, Jobs & Money, Movies, Music, Mystic, Sex & Dating, Sports, Style & Looks, and TV), and offers seemingly unlimited opportunities for teens to voice their opinions, through e-mail/voice mail, instant messaging, chat, personal calendars, message boards, Web site publishing, polls, and surveys.

Several notable commercial teen sites offer a more serious menu, including content on such difficult issues as sexuality, drugs and alcohol, date rape, and AIDS. These same issues have in recent years become an increasing presence in the content of prime-time television and other popular media. But the unique nature of the Internet adds a new dimension to topical content. On the Web teens can discuss their problems with experts without fear of exposure, find “offline” resources for help, and link to communities of other young people who are struggling with the same issues.

drDrew.com bills itself as “the Internet’s leading online lifestyle community for 14-to-24-year-olds.” Hosted by Drew Pinsky, an M.D. who has both radio and MTV credits, the Web site combines serious information on health issues, such as sexual health, mental health, AIDS, physical health and fitness, abuse, addiction, depression, and eating disorders, with content that is more typical of a teen site, such as celebrity stories and book, movie, and music reviews.

Communication features—including message boards, chat rooms, and e-mail—are among the most dominant features of teen Web sites. Nearly three-quarters of the commercial sites in our survey offered bulletin or message boards; almost 60 percent provided chat opportunities, and nearly half offered free e-mail services. Some provide even more elaborate options for online communications, including virtual “pen pals” and instant messaging—enabling teens to carry on a conversation with one or more friends without interrupting their other Web surfing activities—and customized “e-cards” that can be sent directly to a friend’s e-mail address on

demand. Other online applications help teens manage their active social lives, with many sites allowing users to set up personalized calendars, address books, and voice mail. Social interaction, in fact, has become the primary reason most teens use the Web.

At **Teen.com** teens can sign up for e-mail service, send e-cards, find “e-pals,” and keep a journal (which is available for all to read). The site’s e-mail newsletter services, “Daily Rag” and “The Buzz,” supply daily messages to a teen’s e-mail address.

A substantial percentage of the commercial sites encourage teenagers to become involved in the creation of content. Methods of content creation include posting to a message board, asking for or giving advice, publishing a text or poem, writing an editorial or a review, or creating a personal home page. As forms of visual expression that incorporate media images and symbols, the personal home page functions similarly to the bedroom walls of teens.

Angelfire, a division of Lycos and one of the more popular home page hosting services on the Web, offers a guide to the construction of celebrity sites. In addition to outlining the basic components of such sites (which include pictures, bios, reviews, and links to related sites), the Angelfire guide offers links to official celebrity information sites, rich-media search engines, and basic site construction assistance.

Online Marketing to Teens

The Web is breaking down the traditional barriers between “content and commerce,” and introducing new marketing practices tailored to the unique capabilities of the digital media. Teens are a key target for these efforts.

- “Branded communities” for teens have become more and more common in cyberspace. For example, the Cover Girl line of cosmetics touts its “fabulous, free, members-only” CG Connection Club, with its monthly e-mail newsletter offering personal make-up tips, the newest color collections, and an astrological forecast known as the “Beautyscope.”

- “Viral marketing” techniques on teen Web sites are part of the growing arsenal of strategies for promoting “brand awareness” among teens. Viral marketing quietly promotes products or services by including product information, such as a clickable URL, with every communication sent from one user to another.

Market research has been woven into the very fabric of the new teen Web culture, creating a rich and colorful tapestry of interactive features designed not only to engage and entertain, but also to gather valuable intelligence about this lucrative demographic group. The Web itself has become an extension of market research practice, creating a constant feedback loop that monitors not only the interests and tastes of teens, but also some of their most intimate communications and patterns of online behavior. As one industry publication stated, “Web sites designed to get kids talking are big winners. They’re not just a draw for kids, either—they provide marketers with powerful insights on kids’ lives.”

- Opportunities abound for teens to “talk back” to Web sites in a variety of imaginative and innovative forums. Our survey of commercial sites found that more than two-thirds incorporate polls, quizzes, and/or surveys of some form. Teens are also willing and eager to respond to online surveys and questionnaires, providing detailed information about themselves and their families, including their concerns, their habits, their likes and dislikes.
- Marketers do not have to rely solely on information voluntarily provided by teens; they also routinely monitor the chat rooms, bulletin boards, and discussion groups where young people spend so much of their time, gathering valuable insights about the latest trends, hottest products, and most compelling obsessions of the teen world.

Personal Information Collection

Collection of personal information is a pervasive practice on teen Web sites. (Children under the age of 13 are currently protected under the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act [COPPA], which prohibits the collection of personal information by commercial Web sites or online services from these children without parental consent and proper notification. To date, however, teens are not afforded any privacy protections on the Internet.)

Nearly all of the Web sites in our survey collected some form of personal information. The data collected ranged from a simple e-mail address to entire profiles of users (including name,

e-mail and street address, phone number, date of birth, and gender). Sites collect personally identifiable information in a variety of increasingly sophisticated ways:

- Web sites can gather personal data by monitoring e-mail received from users seeking advice or analyzing messages posted to online discussions. Users who subscribe to an online newsletter or who sign an online “guest book,” similarly, may be asked to divulge personal information.
- Among commercial Web sites, the most popular method of data collection is through registering new users, often in return for granting access to special features or content. The registration process varies from site to site, with some sites collecting a minor level of data (e.g., name and e-mail address), while others collect a wealth of personally identifiable information (including name, street address, and personal interests and preferences).
- Some sites offer incentives designed to maximize the amount of information and the level of detail shared.

At **Thirsty.com**, a now-defunct teen “portal” and entertainment site targeting 13- to 22-year-olds, users were rewarded with 150 “Thirsty points” if they gave first and last name, e-mail address, zip code, country, birth date, and gender; they received 250 points more for adding their mailing address and telephone number. If they shared information about their favorite books, shows, sports, trademarks, and other interests, they gained 50 points, while they could earn another 50 points for providing eye color, height, ethnicity, religion, and the URL of their home page. They could even earn 175 points if they submitted a photograph of themselves for inclusion in their online profile.

Teen Spending Online

In the past few years, some companies have been developing a variety of ways to encourage and facilitate online sales transactions to teens. Increasingly, teens make purchases using their own credit cards, although those devices—debit cards, actually—are supported by parents’ funds.

- Popular teens sites such as Bolt.com have launched their own e-commerce stores, while other teen sites, including Teen.com, have made arrangements with stores such as JC Penney and JCrew to offer a virtual shopping mall. Other e-commerce outlets include traditional catalogue sites (e.g., Delias.com and Alloy.com), along

with new shopping portals (e.g., DoughNet.com and Rocketcash.com) that not only present users with purchasing opportunities, but also provide them with the financial mechanisms for purchasing products without a credit card.

- The median amount of money Web users ages 13 to 15 spend online per year is \$360 (or 22 percent of their average income). Web users between 16 and 17 years old spend \$540 annually (13 percent of income), while 18- to 21-year-olds spend \$900 (12 percent). These figures are expected to increase as credit card usage expands among teens, and as alternative payment methods grow in popularity.

The merging of content and commerce, combined with pervasive market research and data collection practices, has created an environment that renders teens especially vulnerable to the power and reach of the new interactive marketplace. It is precisely when teen users become most involved—expressing their opinions, manifesting their preferences, creating content for a site—that marketers can make the best use of them for commercial purposes. It is this curious symbiosis—the richer the site in content and features, the greater the potential rewards for the site’s owner—that defines the online commercial culture for teens.

The Alternative Internet: A Noncommercial and Civic Web Culture for Teens

In the shadows of this glitzy commercial world, a parallel youth culture is also emerging on the Web, one that offers an alternative vision for the digital future. Most of these nonprofit Web sites arise from associations, institutions, and organizations that make up civil society, though some grow out of private-sector initiatives, government programs, or some form of public-private partnership. Many are created by and for youth. Some sites, taking advantage of the boundary-less nature of the Net, connect children and teens from around the world in an effort to promote dialogue and action on international issues.

We have loosely labeled this category of teen Web sites “youth civic media.” Rather than immersing teens in popular culture and consumerism, these Web sites appear to have a more serious focus, often promoting activities that involve thinking about and participating in political, cultural, and civic life. Voluntarism and other forms of social engagement are also prominent features of these sites, as are journalism and various forms of online expression.

These sites could hold promise for a digital environment in which a diversity of voices can be heard, one that positions young people as assets to society, as creators of serious content, and as powerful agents of change for the common good. Because most of these sites are

noncommercial in nature, freedom from the profit motive can allow them to make unique contributions to the public conversation, and in turn to the strengthening of democratic principles.

Our snapshot of this sector shows a nascent, but fragile, youth civic media culture struggling to secure a foothold in the shifting sands of the digital landscape. Many sites are going through a period of experimentation with content, formats, and business models, in an effort to discover “what works” online. Some nonprofit organizations have formed alliances with commercial online ventures in order to attain more visibility. All are trying to come up with successful strategies for sustainability.

Diverse Discourse on Noncommercial Web Sites

Many noncommercial Web sites provide the same kinds of communication features that have made the online experience so appealing to teens, though sometimes without the same bells and whistles (e.g., streaming video, Java applets) that are commonly found on commercial sites. But while many of the functions may be the same, the nature of discourse appears to be quite different.

Rather than prompting teen visitors to vote for a favorite music video or fill out a market research survey, noncommercial sites are more likely to present themselves as a forum for “youth voices”—fostering dialogue and discussion on a wide range of political and social topics, or inviting teens to share their most pressing personal problems with others, using the Web as a kind of virtual support group.

The Diary Project, a nonprofit Web-based initiative founded in 1995, offers teens “of all cultures and backgrounds” an opportunity to “write about their day-to-day experiences growing up. Participants post anonymous, diary-like electronic messages expressing their experiences with such issues as relationships, pressures of teen life, race, class, prejudice, violence, death and other loss, friendship, and body image. Others can respond to the entries by adding comments, providing advice, or offering themselves as support for a struggling teen.

A number of noncommercial Web sites for teens provide platforms for frank discussion about very specific health and sexual issues.

“Sex, etc.” created by and for teens, is the online version of a newsletter that the Network for Family Life Education of Rutgers University’s School of Social Work has been producing and disseminating to schools, teen pregnancy prevention programs, juvenile programs, churches, and other organizations since 1994.

In some cases, online presence is an integral extension of offline organizations, with the purpose of linking the local and virtual worlds of teens. Organizations may provide outlets for creative expression, including art and music—both within a geographic community as well as in an online community—and can encourage youth to plan, create, and participate in outreach and civic-minded projects for their communities.

HarlemLive is an Internet publication space for Harlem’s youth, launched in 1996 as “an empowering way of providing educational and cultural opportunities to youth.” In contrast to the typically light fare of many commercial sites, the electronic message boards on HarlemLive center on issues of race, gender, activism, and community involvement.

Online communities can also transcend geographical barriers, bringing youth together from every wired part of the world. The pockets of youth-oriented international activity currently online involve sharing cultural information, exchanging opinions and ideas, and exploring problem-solving possibilities that exceed any previous generation’s capacity for global connectedness.

Voices of Youth is the UNICEF online interactive forum for young people, a trilingual Web project that operates in the framework of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The site offers learning activities and materials, including Web-based and chat discussions, on issues that affect the lives of children and young people worldwide, such as child labor, youth rights, the environment, armed conflict, urbanization, gender discrimination, and HIV/AIDS.

Nation1, a youth-run, online global “nation,” represents an effort to challenge the constraints of traditional geographic borders, and to explore the possibilities of a globally connected online nation. This virtual community promotes the use of technology to address social, political, and economic issues. As the Web site explains, “Nation1 believes the Internet can capture and dramatically enhance the opportunities for youth awareness and involvement in community decision making.”

Alliances With the Commercial Sector

Several nonprofit youth civic media providers have found it necessary or advantageous to form alliances with commercial online ventures in order to secure funding and visibility in cyberspace. These trends, in which the civic and corporate sectors cross paths, raise important questions about the nature and quality of civic content in the new media.

FreshAngles (originally a noncommercial project called TeenVoice), is an online news publication co-sponsored by the Academy for the Advancement of Science and Technology, Bergen County N.J.’s public magnet high school for science and math, and the *Bergen Record*, the area’s most widely read newspaper. FreshAngles’s mission is to engage teens in the development and implementation of an online project, while serving the needs of its teen audience by addressing topics of interest to young people. One of its goals is to be able to sustain itself through the students’ business activities, which include advertising sales and e-commerce.

YouthNoise, a new Web site undertaken by Save the Children Federation, is designed “to connect, inform, and empower youth to improve their own lives and the lives of other young people through philanthropy, service and policy.” The site offers discussion forums on issues of importance to teens, as well as a “Take Action” section that offers users a chance to act on their beliefs, through volunteer, fundraising, and philanthropic activities. Partners in the project include the AOL Time Warner Foundation, the Advertising Council, as well as Internet application, advertising, and service companies.

As these noncommercial sites struggle to develop sustainable business models, some purely commercial sites are making an effort to offer civic content.

MTV, which was responsible for the “Choose or Lose” campaign, designed to involve youth in the 1996 presidential election, launched its “Fight for Your Rights” campaign in 1999. A large-scale, multi-faceted initiative that combines special programming on its television channel with a variety of activities on the MTV Web site, the project (a partnership with the U.S. departments of Justice and Education, along with the American Psychological Association) is currently focused on educating and activating youth to fight discrimination “based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and physical and/or mental ability.”

As the online civic sector for youth continues to evolve, a number of key questions will need to be addressed: Will compromises between commercial and noncommercial models threaten the diversity of content available, or might they create new models of support that actually nurture diversity, by making it possible for otherwise “unprofitable” fare to remain viable online? Are there qualitative differences between Web sites that emerge out of social-activist roots and those that are created by commercial entities? What happens to a noncommercial site when it takes on certain aspects of a for-profit business model (by forming a partnership with a corporation, for example, or by accepting advertising)? Does the quality of dialogue change in relation to the business model? Does such a change necessarily affect how a site positions teens?

New Trends and Future Directions

The static images that many people associate with the World Wide Web reveal very little of the compelling nature of the digital media system that is just around the corner. But many changes that signal a major transformation of the Internet are already underway:

- Computers are now capable of handling audio files with fidelity that rivals that of CDs, and the quality of streaming video, still in its early development, continues to improve.
- Televisions are now being used to access the Internet, a trend that will grow with the introduction of new, more sophisticated cable set-top boxes.
- Mobile phones, pagers, and personal digital assistants (PDAs) are now manufactured as Internet-ready devices, and video-game consoles are being designed as integrated home entertainment centers, with the ability to play movies and music as well as to surf the Web.

Teens are often the first consumers to embrace these new technologies and services, and thus will be among the first to define the future of new media. “The current generation of teens is not intimidated by technology and does not share the same fears as the rest of us concerning the Internet,” observes Davis Masten of Cheskin Research. “They are very tech savvy and also less susceptible to marketing hype... As they mature, their experiences on the Internet will vastly influence its future development.”

Teens are already producing their own kinds of media “convergence”—by watching television and surfing the Net simultaneously, for example—even in advance of the seismic shifts that are expected to affect the media future. They will continue to “multi-task” in their use of various new-media devices, often viewing, communicating, interacting, and shopping simultaneously. E-mail, voice mail, instant messaging, and other forms of personal communication are likely to remain a key draw for young users.

The Wireless, Interactive Teen World

In the near future, teens will access the Internet through a variety of wireless devices. Teens’ use of personal digital assistants (PDAs), two-way text paging devices, and cell phones is already becoming much more prevalent as decreasing product and service costs make such devices, once a luxury, more common among teens. Already, teens and young adults are the fastest growing market for wireless technology. By 2004, the number of young wireless users aged 18-24 in the U.S. will quadruple, reaching 43 million users.

Mobile phones are being transformed into something that goes well beyond mere tools for communication. They are becoming portable entertainment centers that make it possible to download and listen to music, exchange text messages, play video games, or surf a version of the Web. “This is the first generation that grew up with a mouse in their hands,” observes Don Wisniewski, president of a wireless games company called Cybiko, who sees game playing as one of the driving forces in mobile phone sales. “If teen-agers are going to be buying it, their parents are going to be buying it as well.”

Voxy.com, an interactive site for teen girls, has launched a new service that delivers a recorded voice-mail message from Jennifer Aniston whenever the popular actress is scheduled to participate in a live chat on the site (generally once or twice a month). Such cell phone marketing is an effective way to reach teen girls, according to Voxxy founder Kristi Kaylor: "The teen girl is a complete multi-tasker. She's on her MP3 player while she's reading a magazine and on the phone with friends. This wireless medium is great. It's not like just throwing an ad at them. It's a way to offer a service to our audience, to reach out to girls, wherever they are."

Teens' desire to chat is spawning many new handheld wireless tech products that are designed primarily for instant messaging and chat, but also feature interactive gaming, Internet access, digital picture and music storage, and personal information management. The business applications that drove the initial wave of interactive Palm Pilots and similar PDAs are now being supplemented by all manner of leisure-time and flexible, Net-based programming, including material directed specifically at teens.

"**Dawson's Creek**," the popular teen TV program, offers content accessible via hand-held devices (using Palm and Windows CE operating systems) and Internet-enabled phones. More teen-targeted content is being produced to increase the consumption of these devices. "We think 'Dawson's Creek' is a show that can help drive adoption of this [PDA] technology by teens," observes Tim Chambers, Columbia TriStar director of technology and production. Other teen-oriented content providers, including gURL.com, Alloy, Bolt, and dELiAs.com, are offering teens access to news, events, and shopping information via cell phones and pagers.

New wireless devices will include location-positioning technology due to a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) mandate to be able to locate people who dial 911 from their cell phones. This technology will also allow marketers to send ads and coupon incentives to PDAs, cell phones, and other wireless handheld devices. According to one enthusiastic industry report, "Wireless Web companies are enthralled with the idea of m-commerce, as it's being called, because it puts customers in their crosshairs. Passing a Starbucks? Why not stop in and take advantage of that special offer that just popped up on your screen? Get a free muffin with your Frappuccino. This sort of 'push' advertising is seen as the ultimate in consumer marketing."

Advertising and Shopping on Interactive Television

The Internet is beginning to shape interactive TV advertising as well. This personalized and specifically targeted advertising and content is the wave of the future. As technology changes both the television viewing experience and the nature of television advertising, it will create more opportunities for the collection of users' personal information and viewing behavior, and for the subsequent "mining" of this data. This, in turn will fuel the proliferation of individualized, tailored content and specifically targeted advertising in this medium.

Although the full potential of interactive advertising is still years off, some implementations of these new trends have begun to appear. "Low-tech" previews of onscreen cross-promotion, combining the separate media of television and the Internet, are laying the groundwork for their convergence in the future.

"Passions," the daytime soap opera, combined the availability of TV-promoted e-commerce with an in-show product placement in July 2000. Following an episode in which a group of teenage characters received bracelets commemorating their high school prom, a post-show promo encouraged viewers to log on to the show's Web site to purchase a "Passions 2000" bracelet. With an interactive television, the viewer could simply click on the bracelet to purchase it while watching the program.

WebTV teamed up with a San Francisco-based UPN channel in 1999 to offer an interactive advertisement for Domino's pizza during a "Star Trek" marathon. When the promotion aired, users were presented with the opportunity to purchase a pizza online using their WebTV device.

The implications of interactivity for teens, who are growing up in an overwhelmingly commercialized media environment, will be profound. No longer subjected merely to discrete "words from our sponsor" that traditionally distinguished programming from sales pitch, today's youth will inherit a media system that is thoroughly suffused with commercial activity—much of it disguised as "personalized" service. And when this targeted, interactive marketing and promotion reaches across several platforms—from film and televised entertainment to networked PCs, PDAs and other information and communication devices—the prospects for unsponsored speech, for civic discourse and noncommercial content that lack these economic incentives, will be diminished accordingly.

Recommendations

For the Academic Research Community

There is an urgent need for further research on the role that new media are playing in the lives of youth. Much of what is known about how teens are interacting with the new digital media is confined to the proprietary domain of market research, which is either completely off-limits to outsiders or priced so prohibitively as to be inaccessible to the public.

Using CME's investigation and analysis of current trends in teen online culture as a guidepost, academic researchers should look further at the impact of these new media on the lives of individual adolescents.

1. Research addressing the impact of these new media on the lives of individual adolescents should include the following questions:
 - What will be the impact of teens' "multi-tasking" (engaging in several media and communications activities simultaneously) on the depth of their processing and the length of their attention spans?
 - How will the present and coming generations of adolescents differ from earlier generations as a result of ready access to increasing amounts of information, especially about traditionally private or forbidden topics?
 - How will the new digital media culture interact with and affect a teen's developing identity?
2. In addition to longitudinal studies of the impact of media, focused, policy-relevant research should address specific issues and needs. Such research should go beyond the more narrow concerns of individual use and impact, taking into account not only personal differences, but also income, ethnic, geographic, and sexual differences within this highly diverse group of young people.
3. To fully inform the public, the research must be disseminated in a timely fashion, not only within the community of scholars, but to a larger audience of parents, health professionals, educators, and policymakers.

For Government Policymakers, Industry, Educators, and the Public

It will take a combination of government policymakers, responsible industry self-regulation, public education, and citizen activism to ensure that this new digital consumer culture treats young people fairly. Again using CME's investigation and analysis the following recommendations are put forth:

For Government Policymakers

1. Consumer protection policies are needed to ensure that teens are not taken unfair advantage of in the new digital marketplace. Policies should protect teens' personal and financial privacy in the online, wireless and interactive television environment and should also address possible exploitation by offline and online credit and debit cards.
2. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should enact and enforce clear and effective safeguards now to protect teens from manipulative and exploitative advertising in interactive television.
3. Privacy protections afforded by the Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984 should be extended to cover all interactive media, regardless of the delivery method.
4. Safeguards should be established to protect the privacy of teens on their cell phones and other "smart" wireless devices that employ Global Positioning Systems (GPS) location positioning software so that marketers cannot use these E-911 technologies for location-based direct advertising pitches.
5. The FTC should investigate new market research practices (such as the creation of online focus groups disguised as "e-zines" or chat rooms) that may well be deceptive.
6. The FCC should continue to support the e-rate for schools to provide the broadest access to the Internet for youth and teens, including underprivileged and underserved. Access to digital media in schools, communities and homes is indispensable in an information-age democracy.

7. The Department of Education should promote awareness of students' online privacy concerns and protections. In addition, it should establish safeguards to protect students' privacy from in-school marketing practices.
8. The government should endorse and publicly fund an "electronic commons" to provide significant space in this new media for all types of noncommercial content.

For Industry

1. Surreptitious e-commerce marketing practices, such as data mining should be discontinued. Such practices are developing faster than policies to protect teen consumers. At the very least, market researchers should be more truthful in notifying teens about their data collection practices and offer teens the option to delete any personal information that might have been collected.
2. Clear delineation between content and advertising must be established.
3. The media industries must do more to support a quality civic media culture, one that will serve teens as citizens. Active support and encouragement should be given to an "electronic commons" where teens and youth can go to access resources for citizen involvement.
4. The media industries should use their digital capacity to provide broadband or data-casting services to local schools, libraries or community centers that serve youth.

For Educators

1. There is a need for comprehensive consumer education and media literacy training in the schools, with a curriculum that is sufficiently flexible to stay current in this rapidly changing marketplace.
2. Schools, information technology centers and libraries should be encouraged to guide youth to the civic content available on the Web and assist them in interacting with it.

3. The educational system should explore and utilize electronic media as a resource for building active, skilled citizens and provide opportunities for youth to learn how to produce their own civic content. Schools should develop curriculum in civic education, service learning and media arts that maximize both.
4. Teachers who use computers in their curriculum should make their students aware of the importance of privacy and caution them about divulging too much personal information.

For the Public

1. Parents and guardians should inform themselves about the new media their children are using.
2. Parents, caretakers and others involved with children should teach them the importance of protecting their personal privacy online.
3. A broad public education effort is necessary focussing on new media market research practices and how to safeguard children from them.

**TeenSites.com:
A Field Guide to the New Digital Landscape**

can be downloaded at www.cme.org

© 2001 Center for Media Education

Designed by Betsy Berlin, Miss Pixel Graphics



Center for Media Education

2120 L Street, NW, Suite 200
Washington, D.C. 20037

Tel 202-331-7833

Fax 202-331-7841

www.cme.org