

Young People and the New Technologies – Perspectives on Internet and Mobile Services in Drug and Alcohol Prevention

Teuvo PELTONIEMI

Head of Information Department at A-Clinic Foundation, Helsinki, Finland
Vice President of Prevnet Network

Imagine a summer scene at a park in Helsinki where young people are drinking, using their mobile phones to speak and send SMS. But what we see is not the complete picture, because there are young people just around the corner also communicating through SMS with the visible group. This picture illustrates a new phenomenon. The kids still are part of a community; and they relate mainly by telematics.

Why telematics?

The use of telematics, which by the way is an EU English term, the use of internet, mobile phones etc. seems to many of us to broaden our possibilities in life, to simplify complicated world structures, to make it easier to be interactive, to keep anonymity and to lower the threshold of anxiety when seeking help in certain situations. Telematics can also empower people to use their resources. Our own services in Finland like AddictionLink and HelpInfo use telematics extensively. It has increased our possibilities in prevention and treatment. We can now do things which formerly we could not.

There are many areas of life that can be changed by telematics, where the virtual reality and virtual worlds can be different from the real world we are living in. But in this presentation I will only speak of interactivity and social and psychological distance regulation. The virtual world seems to allow more freedom, not only technically, not only as freedom of action, but also as contents. Cyberspace is a tool, the virtual world is a place and it is also a way of being.

Face-to-face versus anonymity

What is not necessarily understood at first is that we still hang on to the idea that speaking and especially working face-to-face cannot be replaced by anything else. This argument was also used by our treatment staff; they ask why we want to put time and money into telematics when the main and indispensable element in human interaction is the face-to-face relation. But I argue that it is not so and that we as human beings wish to be able to regulate the contact distance, as the incredible and rapid success of ATM all over the world shows. What people want is cash and not a new human relation with the teller of a bank every time they need money. They want to regulate the psycho-social distances in a way that allows them to save social energy for other purposes, for human relationships they consider to be of importance.

In my youth I attended a boys-only school and had very limited possibilities to get to know girls. Unless I met a girl I fancied in a suitable social gathering I had to try to

contact her by phone. The call was perhaps answered by a big brother who more often than not poked fun at me, and when I finally could speak to the girl and ask her whether she would like to go out with me the following Saturday night, she would perhaps say, sorry, next Saturday I am not free and will not be free next month nor the whole of the coming year. In such a situation both of us were embarrassed and lost face, she – because she did not want to meet me and had to say so, and I – for obvious reasons.

How easy it has become today for young people! They send a text message and if they do not get an answer, that's it. If the fellow is very persistent, he may think that it was cyberspace who lost the message and try again. But if there is still no answer he will know what's the matter and neither he nor the girl will have lost face. Basically, that is how one is able to keep and regulate the social and psychological distance in the relationships between people.

Telematics and the youth: a natural connection

Speaking of young people and telematics, what has changed? I have tried to list a few points. Some of them are quite natural and belong to the biological development of young people. They are not hampered by old traditions and are open to the new, ready to test things and eager to learn. When today's young people were born telematics, of course, already existed. Young people are very talented psychologically and physically, they have good reactions and learn quickly.

Another thing is that the time perspective of the young people is very short. As we know, young people do not die – that's why scare techniques in drug education do not really work. Death, sickness, worries, all that lies somewhere in the future. Young people also do not pay very much attention to the ethical and security issues in telematics. Many of them never think of the fact that even years later, when surfing on the Internet, future employers will be able to read all the texts and biographical data they leave behind.

Of course, young people have been the first to realise the great practical value of telematics. They are the first generation to use net business, electronic banking, info services, net education and distant working. For them that is natural, for us it is not. We, older people, have to learn it, we still compare these new techniques to the traditional ones.

Today young people want to have fun first and foremost. In telematics they see an instrument for more fun, with interactive possibilities. There are also financial reasons. Despite the fact that youngsters have a lot of money nowadays, they still have less than older people. The brand culture and newest fashions cost a lot of money. This is one of the reasons why young people have been and still are very inventive in terms of money saving devices. The use of SMS and "dead calls" – brief-signal-only calls – is definitely an invention of the young.

Psychological reasons to use telematics

Mobile phones, as well as telematics in general, are instruments of personal power, especially for the young. It gives them a feeling of control and command, it

emphasizes their individuality and, of course, allows them to build up their identity and to play and even change roles. On the Internet especially but also on mobile phones you can impersonalize yourself to somebody else. It can be a good method for getting to know about another person in a general way, for dating, for sex or other relations and then, of course, for avoiding silence and inactivity. Not only television, radio and music but also telematics are filling the emptiness when one is alone. Text messages are often sent when one feels unwell or lonely.

Relevant differences in behaviour between boys and girls using telematics have been observed. Computer business has been from the start men's business and still seems to be. But the girls, at least in Finland, are the main users of mobile phones and text-messages. They speak on the mobile phones and send SMSs more often than boys and write longer and more emotional messages, using every possible abbreviation in order to convey as much information as possible. When a young fellow sends a message, it will mostly be short and to the point, like: "OK, I will be there at five".

Symbolic value of telematics for the young

Telematics have great symbolic value for the young because they are the ones that use them most. Telematics are also an anti-adult thing, a means to underline the excellence of the youths and to demonstrate that older people do not understand anything anyway. Even the text-messages are demonstrative, young people send messages to their parents in a very different style and language than when they send messages to peers. Telematics are also instrumental in building up a culture, a peer-culture more precisely.

Telematics are an instrument and symbol for virtual social communities. I consider this the most significant influence telematics have on young people, as I was able to demonstrate when I started with the example of a small group in that park in Helsinki. Where earlier our groups were small and disparate, they are now large and intensive. Friendships have improved, companionships giving social support are now more solid and the mobile phone is a steady partner.

Telematics and drugs on the net

There are already hundreds of drug and alcohol prevention sites. In some countries telematics, Internet especially, are already often and well used for prevention and even for treatment. In Finland we have our AddictionLink, a lively discussion area, anonymous consultation, many self-evaluation tests etc, services that are used by more than 30,000 persons a month. It has become a normal part of the activities of the A-Clinic Foundation. My organization has over 700 staff, and there are now more people that we serve over the internet than in traditional face-to-face situations. This has much expanded our sphere of activity.

Controlling Internet and other telematics

But there is also the other face of that coin. On Internet one can find more material advertising drugs as fancy, pleasant and beautiful than prevention texts or programmes saying why one should not use them. There are many texts advocating free drug policy, there is trade, especially of cannabis and also of synthetic drugs,

but possibly this is not against the existing legislation of some countries. This trend is not decreasing, on the contrary. Internet reaches so very far, it has so many possibilities that there always will be a channel conveying a message that it is quite different from the ones we want to give. This is why we should not leave the Internet to those who promote the use of drugs or offer them for sale.

Especially in the US, many parental control programmes are trying to censor unwanted material from the kid's reach. China and Saudi Arabia are trying to ban certain sites for the whole population. The ethical questions around telematics are many in addition to child pornography, narcotics sales, gambling and political issues, most of them very debated. We are already aware of the difficult ethical aspects of telematics and there will be more to come. The European Union, the USA and other responsible nations will have to consider appropriate legislation. For lack of proper legislation and without international pressure measures shadow companies and small offshore countries can undermine the benefits of Internet as we have seen in the increasing flood of spam.

The new telematic tools also raise privacy issues. Does someone in this audience have a phone with a camera? When you take pictures in a pub, how do you handle that? Should you ask everyone who also happens to be on the picture whether they agree that you take and send it? We have to think carefully about those many new issues, they will come up all the time.

Technical and social issues of telematics in the future

The European Union is encouraging and promoting the use of telematics and e-Health. In the future surely issues like quality proof systems and regulations, standardization of platforms and interfaces are being developed as well as new technologies, especially high speed and broadband services. For the mobile phones there are the camera and 3G versions, which have already been mentioned.

Locating services

Location and positioning services already exist. They use Internet, cellular networks and satellites to determine physical locations of mobile phones and people. In Tokyo they have been used for years. In that huge city, due to the complicated address system, even a taxi driver really needs that kind of help. But also in Europe and the US the use of location services is expanding. The USA has even decided that all mobile phones must have that feature for rescue purposes.

Locating services are good instruments, but they also raise ethical questions. They can be used and abused as tools of control, for instance, to see where your children, your husband or your wife are at a precise moment. The discussion about these important ethical questions has to be taken up soon – and very thoroughly.

Telematics have brought back the written word

The use of mobile phones has been growing steadily in Europe, much more rapidly than the use of home computers and Internet. Mobile phones are reaching saturation point in many Western countries. The telephone is actually the oldest telematic

instrument, it was already available long ago to nearly all the population and many people seem to feel that it is easier to use than Internet on many occasions.

SMS, a text-message scroll, has been the most notably new feature that has come up these last few years, originally designed by engineers as just a little tool to announce that a voice message has come in. It was the users, especially the young people, who discovered its potential for other forms of messaging. The increase in the use of SMS in Europe can be said to have been astronomical.

That brings us to an interesting point, which is that with e-mail and SMS expansion, the written word has returned. It appears that people love written telematics like e-mails, SMS, chat and television SMS-chats. A text message or e-mail has accuracy and resembles spoken language. It is possible later on to return to the message and the given answer. It grants anonymity when this is wished for and it helps regulating the social distance.

The treatment people may argue that face-to-face communication still is best, but in many situations it seems to be of help to have at least part of the verbal communication also in writing. When seeing a doctor it happens that I do not remember everything I had planned to tell him and neither do I remember everything he said to me. So it might be sensible to put down the essentials of this consultation in writing. Now that is exactly what is taking place in e-mails and SMSs. On the other hand, written messages require basic writing skills and habits, and there is a certain slowness of interaction and lack of immediate feedback that can be negative.

Some Finnish examples of virtual prevention

In 2001, Finnish researchers Kasesniemi and Rautiainen stated that "the communication jungle of teenagers is too dense for adults to understand". We should be aware that not just an instrumental, technical development is taking place, but also a revolutionary change in the life of the young people when compared to the life of the older generation. One of the main causes of this difference is the use of text messages and we must take this fact into consideration when planning our prevention strategies. Here are some examples and suggestions based on the Finnish experiences.

Some years ago, we started a SMS programme comprising an anonymous BAC (Blood Alcohol Contents) distant promise calculator. The user sends information about his gender, weight, the number of drink units he has consumed, the starting time of the drinking session. The distant calculator will return an estimate of the BAC. Why are people using this service so often? They could use a pocket calculator or look into a booklet to get the same estimate. But when somebody is drinking in a bar and takes out a pocket calculator or a booklet, people around him may start asking him what he is doing. Whereas when he is sending a text message, nobody will pay any attention because everybody is doing that anyway. So Promise SMS is a socially invisible way of controlling your drinking and to know whether you are able to drive a car.

Virtual chat bus HUBU is one of the popular virtual services on drugs in Finland. It is a part of the popular Finnish Internet chat Hotel Kultakala, where over 400,000

different characters are created by youths aged 10-16. Virtual HUBU bus has a constant queue as young people are eager to get into it and speak about drugs among themselves and with a mediator who monitors talks and answers questions on drugs. HUBU is now available in many European countries.

The Textari-Helppi experiment of the Lahti Parish gives us a good insight into the problems and preoccupations young people are experiencing. In Lahti in Finland about one hundred students and teachers were answering the text messages young people sent them. The main topics were dating and sexuality, but other subjects like alcohol, abortion, army, communication problems, mental health etc. also came up.

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Address:

Teuvo.Peltoniemi@a-klinikka.fi