Teens & Information Seeking: The What, Why, & How?
By Matt MacNeil

By their very nature—being young, yet on the cusp of adulthood—the teen demographic of every generation holds a uniqueness all its own. In many regards, the young adults of today are coming of age in an information-rich world unlike any seen before it. Despite growing up in a time of thriving technology, teens often hold a misconception regarding the true extent of their "tech-savvy " skills. From the various capabilities of the internet, to cell phones, to gaming consoles, the average teen of today is a born multitasker, and has access to a seemingly limitless sea of information. It is in the effective navigation of this sea that libraries can, and should, play a pivotal role in the lives of young adults. This article will be exploring the information seeking behavior of teens, the realities of their information literacy skills, and the approaches libraries can adopt in order to keep up with this digital generation.

Digitally Divided?

Despite ready access to information, librarians must take into account the reality of the digital divide that exists between different groups of teens. Researchers have described the concept of the digital divide amongst teens as the "unequal access to the internet and its use because of the interplay between different factors such as age, gender, origin, level of education and socioeconomic status" (Boonaert &Vettenburg, 2011, p. 55). Young adults coming from families with a lower socioeconomic status tend to use the internet and information technology tools as much as those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, but the difference lies in the actual nature of this use. Teens in the first group tend to use information technology for entertainment purposes, whereas teens from the second group, tend to use the technology for purposes such as schoolwork, looking up information, and emailing (Boonaert & Vettenburg, 2011). This contrast is critical

for librarians to keep in mind, as it serves to shape the library's understanding of, and interaction with, the teens within their community.

The Information Habits of Teens

In the past, when attempting to study the information seeking habits of young adults, much of the emphasis has been placed on their role as students (Livingstone & Helsper, 2009). With widespread internet access and the proliferation of mobile devices, what is important to keep in mind is that teens now have access to a wealth of knowledge literally at the click of a button, and this access can be achieved from practically anywhere. Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge a much wider scope of teen information needs beyond the traditional homework assignment or classroom setting.

The teenage and young adult period encompasses the ages of twelve to eighteen, and with such a broad range of maturity levels, there is a natural variance in terms of what and how the extremes on this spectrum seek out and access information. While younger teens may be utilizing the internet for seeking out the latest YouTube meme, or gathering general information for school assignments, older teens may be using the internet for social networking, more intense

school research, and more focused activities such as finding political information, new job vacancies and information about financial and health services (Boonaert & Vettenburg, 2011).

Online Activities of Teens - PEW Internet Project 2010 (2009 stats)

- 73% of online teens use SNS (up 50%)

- 14% blog (down 50%)

- 8% use Twitter

- 8% visit online virtual worlds

- 38% share content online (steady)

- 21% remix content (steady)

- 62% get news about current events and politics

- 48% buy things online

- 31% get health, dieting, fitness info

- 17% get info about sensitive health topics

Regardless of age, one constant of teen information seeking habits is the "Principle of Least Effort" (Dreseng, 2005). This is not to say that teens are necessarily lazy in their approach to seeking out information, but that they generally choose the path of least resistance. Dreseng (2005) notes that this approach is common human behavior, and when approaching the task of online exploration, teens naturally attempt to

"[m]inimize the overall work associated with something, both now and in the anticipated future" (p. 181). Unfortunately, despite all of its advantages, the vastness of the World Wide Web tends to foster this mentality. Being accustomed to the immediacy of information availability, teens tend to go no further than the top Google results when exploring the Internet.

The nature of web searching contributes to this "least resistance" mentality, as research has shown that teens throughout the entire age spectrum have difficulty formulating and modifying search queries; they like to browse for information, prefer to search by keywords for more focused queries, and have difficulties with Boolean logic (Hirsh, 2007). As far back as 1998, research conducted by Schacter, Chung and Door found that teens, "[p]erceive the materials they find from an electronic source to be more relevant and more valuable than those they find in print, and…they depend heavily on electronic resources to supply their need for information" (p. 846). With so much information available to them, teens tend to adopt the mindset of quantity equals quality and that by the sheer number of "hits" a certain search approach garners, it is assumed that information found online is not only plentiful, but will satisfy all their needs.

Are Teens Really in the Know?

This leads us to the obvious question of determining the extent of young adults' information literacy skills. Despite growing up in an environment saturated with information technology, the reality of the day is that teens lack a fundamental understanding of the informational complexities of these devices they rely on. Livingstone and Helsper (2009) define internet information literacy as "[a] multidimensional construct that encompasses the abilities to access, analyze, evaluate and create online content" (p.311). It follows that in a study conducted by the Nielson Norman Group in 2005, researchers concluded that "teenagers are not in fact superior Web geniuses who can use anything a site throws at them" (Nielson, 2005). Even though the young adults of today have had early experiences with digital technologies, by all accounts many lack a deeper understanding of the inner workings of the internet or the nature by which online commercial search engines rank results (Geck, 2006). Furthermore, it should be pointed out that most teens are unfamiliar with information resources that are not free on the Internet, such as commercial subscription databases, books, and magazine serials.

> **Information Literacy Education in Teens: Librarians can be...**
>
> • Instructors and teachers, in both daily interactions with teens and planned sessions
>
> • Models of information literate people when communicating with teens
>
> • Creators and promoters of information tools - creating websites, blogs, and promoting free software options
>
> • Collaborators with other community stakeholders in teenage information literacy - parents, teachers, and, most importantly, teens themselves

The definition of information literacy highlighted above draws much of its reasoning from older forms of information literacy. With less variety in available information tools, i.e., largely books and print journals, members of older generations had to more actively compare the advantages, disadvantages, and strengths and weaknesses of information sources (Geck 2006). This automatic tendency to judge and analyze information sources is a skill that, due largely to inexperience, is seriously lacking amongst today's young adult population. With Google's ability to present teens with tens of thousands of search results seemingly instantly, and with many younger teens having never truly

known a world without this capability, many are not aware of search strategies and resources that would be better suited to answer certain types of questions. Their interaction with Google makes teens feel self-sufficient, smart, and powerful when retrieving such an overabundance of results (Geck, 2006). The lack of a discerning eye when sifting through these results is a common misstep among teens. So what can be done?

Librarians as Guides

There is no easy fix to the problem of sub-par information seeking habits amongst young adults, but librarians must recognize the fundamental obligation they have in addressing these vital members of the community. Through a re-envisioning of library goals, librarians can create an atmosphere rich in the exercise, strengthening, and development of teen information literacy skills. Expanding and studiously updating information literacy focused programs offered to teens is one step in reaching this goal. Tutorials centered around the principles of such issues as copyright law, plagiarism and online information privacy, if presented in a relatable manner to teen culture, can lay the groundwork for informed, information literate, adults in the future. Partnering with

local schools and community centers in mutual education relationships is a great way to gain access to teens who would not normally utilize the public library. It is vital that librarians make every effort to become a visible and approachable fixture in the lives of teens in their community, fostering mutual respect and information literacy education along the way.

Librarians can be...

• Continuous students of information literacy - continuing education in information literacy trends

• Informed leaders - keeping track of the newest developments in information technology

• Marketers to teens for the library as a valuable information skills development resource

Aiming beyond basic information seeking skills, and by listening and actively partnering with young adults, librarians can foster the capacity in teens to thoroughly research and examine the world in which we live, and not just gather facts about it. Although the nature of libraries may change over time, the importance of librarians reaching and guiding young adults will not.

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