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## **Social Networks as a New Tool that Facilitates the Development of Urban Adolescents**

*The article demonstrates that the extent and mode of adolescent participation in social networks have changed with the rapid development of social media technologies. If, at the time when they were first introduced, social networks complemented direct communication and were studied as a separate additional space, now, because of the development of mobile technologies, direct and indirect communications have merged to form a single space. This is reflected in the fact that adolescents have a hard time distinguishing between these spaces in their responses to surveys. This reality, which we discovered during the course of our study, indicates that the methodology that is used to study both the communication of adolescents and the social networks themselves should be revised. Social networks have integrated themselves into the lives of schoolchildren, though their potential for education and the question of how they can be integrated into the*

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*education system have been totally ignored. In fact, our study has confirmed the existence of a new, third wave of the computerization of education. This one is not being conducted from the top down, as was true of the two previous ones (which occurred in the 1980s and 2000s), in which state goals for the computerization of the school system led to transformations at the level of the individual schools. Rather, users are instigating this new revolution, and the formal structures are being forced to respond. It has turned out that the system of education is not prepared for such a situation, and as a result teachers and administrators are imposing unjustified and easily violated bans on the use of personal devices. As a consequence, students are becoming increasingly alienated from school.*

## **Introduction**

Contemporary Russian and international studies confirm that young people are increasingly interested in the resources that are offered by the World Wide Web. One of the most popular services among adolescents and youth who use the Internet are social networks. According to statistics, currently 90 percent [1] of American teenagers, 63 percent [2] of European children between the ages of 9 and 16, and 97 percent [3] of Russian students in high school (based on a survey that was conducted in Moscow) have at least one social media account. As a phenomenon, Internet services, which trace their origins to the 1990s and have massively expanded over the past 8 years, continue to evolve. With the advent of the mass use of smartphones, the interfaces for most social media platforms were adapted for touchscreens. This has allowed social media to become a convenient means for exchanging messages, retrieving information, and watching the news because smartphones are always at hand and they have wireless Internet access.

Social media services as a new social phenomenon can be described and studied in various contexts. In our study, we proceeded from the fact that social media provide a new space for adolescents to socialize (by providing a substratum of the main activity), and we considered this phenomenon in terms of

how it could help solve the basic problems of adolescence [4, 5]. Accordingly, the study focused on three interrelated aspects of social networks: spaces where teenagers can communicate with each other outside of adult supervision, spaces that offer opportunities for broadening the communicative capabilities of school education, and spaces that indicate a new direction in the development of education.

### **The convergence of online and offline communication for modern adolescents**

Most studies of social networks consider them in isolation from other spaces and as a separate domain where adolescents socialize with each other [6–8]. In particular, many studies analyze the amount of time that schoolchildren spend on social networks, and the use of these networks by teenagers is considered as complementary to direct face-to-face interaction. These views led us to pose the following initial hypotheses of our study: At the start of our research project, “Social Networks as a New Tool that Facilitates the Development of Adolescents,” we assumed that social networks mediate adolescent communication. In other words, the ability to communicate virtually would replace the need for face-to-face interaction, thereby transforming the space in which communication takes place [9, 10]. Consequently, we considered studying social networks as a new “isolated” space for intimate-personal communication between modern teenagers.

The opposition of communication on social networks to communication in real life represents a research trend of recent years. “The Role of Virtual Social Networks in the Life of Modern Schoolchildren” project describes how adolescents were asked about what they had to “sacrifice” when they communicate on social networks, and the article characterized how adolescents spend time in the social media space over the course of a day or week [11]. According to the experts at the Perekrestok Center, groups of adolescents have almost entirely disappeared from the

streets. This process has taken place at the same time as the increase in the number of opportunities for self-realization that are accessible to teenagers [12].

However, in our study we focused primarily on the actual communication practices of schoolchildren. We considered social networks only as a new space. This focus determined the research design of our study, which is aimed at studying the entire range of communications: direct and mediated by social networks. This has made it possible to obtain new data that point to the fact that direct and indirect communications are converging, which, in turn, raises the question of revising the original hypothesis that real communication is being replaced by social media services.

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to collect empirical data. During the first stage of the study, a group of Moscow high schoolers were asked to keep a diary (in either paper or electronic form) for a week. The diary consisted of a table with two columns: "Online" and "Offline." A total of 10 Moscow students between the ages of 14 and 16 (six girls and four boys) participated in the study. The teenagers would list all of the events that involved the use of a gadget or a computer in the "Online" column, such as when they went on the Internet or communicated on social networks, etc. Such actions could occur both independently or as part of an event in real life: One of the girls (13 years old) wrote the following in her diary: "Usually I pick up my phone when I am eating breakfast ... and I play a game while eating." The "Offline" column was used to list events that did not involve the use of Internet-enabled devices. Interviews were conducted after the students completed the diaries where the latter were given an opportunity to discuss the events that they noted in their diaries in more detail, and the interviewer and each participant viewed and discussed their profile on VKontakte and the posts that they made over the past week.

This methodology made it possible to determine the actual times when the students used their gadget or social media services during the day, how online and offline activities intersect and are staggered with each other, and the occasions

and reasons to go online. The conducted research has shown that combined offline and online communications between modern adolescents are more than just isolated phenomena. On the one hand, adolescents spend most of the day in front of laptops, mobile devices, and other gadgets that are in the possession of most contemporary young people. Online activity, whether viewing sites, listening to music, or using social networks, occurs while they are in class at school; when they are talking to their parents, classmates, and friends; or when they are walking and traveling on public transport. On the other hand, there are certain kinds of “red zones” where the teenager will choose not to escape into their parallel reality and give their undivided attention to what is going on in reality. These occur when there is an interesting or difficult lesson in class or when an important event takes place while they are out for a stroll or socializing with peers, parents, etc.

The results of this study demonstrate the need to explore the daily activities of adolescents as a whole and to obtain a wider understanding of their participation on social networks as an integral part of communication. We can see on the basis of how people communicate on social networks while at the same time engaging in other activities that members of modern society increasingly multitask.

This finding poses new research questions and provides us with a new methodological perspective. We believe that it is the task of future studies to significantly expand the research context by analyzing social networks not as ends in themselves, but as the means of solving other, more general problems, and in particular the age-related problem of how adolescents develop self-awareness.

We also discovered that the growing accessibility of social networks places higher demands on the content of the other activities that adolescents participate in, such as, for example, learning: Students will only disconnect themselves from the Internet in class only if they find the lesson to be really interesting.

### **Accessibility of social networks in class. Usage strategies and administrative prohibitions**

Taking into account the qualitative research data, we developed an instrument for quantitative data collection, namely a questionnaire that allowed us to conduct a mass survey of high school students. The sample size was 3,194 respondents, including Moscow high school students and students from other educational institutions between the ages of 16 and 18. The study confirmed our hypothesis that the vast majority of students use wireless mobile technologies while participating in offline activities at the same time. The data that we received show that modern Moscow teenagers are totally agile and autonomous in how they use mobile devices. They possess their own gadgets that can be used to access the Internet. Even when they are at home and have access to a desktop computer, they still prefer to use their personal devices. This may be attributable either to simple convenience and a reluctance to switch between devices as well as to a desire for independence, autonomy, and an avoidance of parental supervision.

As a rule, adolescents between the ages of 12 and 14 use social networks to communicate and chat with each other. The most popular of them include VKontakte. A total of 91 percent of respondents indicated that they use this Russian social network. Students note that they use social networks not only for communication and entertainment, but also to search for information and work with educational content. Despite the widespread prohibitions on the use of mobile devices in educational organizations, young people often continue to actively use their smartphones. We did not study the methods that are used to enforce gadget prohibition in school, how teachers control this situation in the classroom or how students bypass these prohibitions, but the data show that more than half of teenagers (70 percent) use mobile devices in class to view information on social networks, listen to music, and play games. On the other hand, more than half (70 percent) of teenagers also answered that they use personal mobile devices in class in order to access educational content.

It is interesting that, according to the data that we received, student academic performance is not affected by how intensively students use mobile devices that are not allowed by the teacher during class either for entertainment purposes or for finding educational information. The results of the study showed that at least among students who participate in Olympiads [academic quiz competitions], the percentage that use a mobile phone or another gadget in class is lower. This can be attributed to their higher motivation to learn and greater involvement in the learning process, as these students are preparing to participate in subject-based Olympiads. No connections were discovered between the use of gadgets and academic achievement when broken down by other criteria (gender, level of academic achievement or type of school).

Thus, we can state that today a technical tool has emerged: the student's personal device, which has so far been completely ignored by the school. Thanks to gadgets, social networks are able to penetrate all areas of the life of modern urban adolescents, including education, communicating with peers and parents, and leisure activities. Unlike Western schools, which have adapted to the new wave of mobile devices [13–15] by trying to harness the potential of these technologies for educational purposes, Russian schools have continued to take a negative attitude to modern technologies.

We believe that such a situation (“they are banned, but we use them anyway”) only exacerbates the so-called alienation of students from school, because such a policy tells students that they can ignore school rules and prohibitions. Such regulations are exposed as being artificial and isolated from reality.

Quantitative research (surveying) has also allowed us to identify a new phenomenon in school development, which we have called the “third wave of computerization.” The phenomenon whereby the school space has become saturated with the pocket personal computers of students in fact represents a new wave of computerization, which the Russian school system has so far ignored. The emergence of mobile devices has created new conditions for the computerization of instruction. This time it has not



been dictated by the state, as it was in the mid-1980s and in the 2000s, but by the users of mobile devices themselves: the school-children. However, teachers have ignored this phenomenon. Nevertheless, the educational landscape is changing substantially.

The study has shown that students often have more modern devices than what the educational institution offers. The teacher is no longer the only authoritative source of information, because the amount of information that is available over the Internet is much greater. Teenagers themselves note that they use mobile devices not only for entertainment and communication, but also to advance their educational goals.

Thus, the school has found itself in an unexpected situation where a typical class has started to be transformed into a community of advanced Internet users who are constantly online and are able to easily switch between learning, communication, and entertainment. How is the system reacting to this? The school insists on artificially immersing students in an environment that they find completely alien, thereby depriving them of all these possibilities. The school equipment that is intended for students is often not available, and many restrictions are imposed on how it is used. It is becoming useless. Given the fact that students continue to use their own personal devices even when they are at home, it is no surprise that they do not exhibit much interest in the school's computers, which are already obsolete. On the other hand, these restrictions put up road blocks for innovative teachers who use social networks to communicate with students and who try to involve and interest them by using mobile devices during the lessons, etc.

Nevertheless, it is also important to note the progress that the system has managed to achieve. Today's teachers communicate with students via e-mail and on social networks. They use these media periodically to assign homework to these students. These assignments must be performed online or with the use of Internet services.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of the project, we have been able to arrive at the following main conclusions. They not only point to new

realities, but they also allow us to pose new research questions. It has been shown that schoolchildren are almost constantly active on social networks. Therefore, analyses that assume that online communication is divorced from offline interactions are increasingly invalid given the development of mobile technologies, because such a division increasingly does not reflect the reality of communication. Only small areas remain where direct offline communication is the exclusive norm, including in the educational space. These are situations where what is happening “here and now” holds special significance for the teenager. Thus, they are only willing to engage in such unmediated offline communication when something particularly attractive, interesting, or difficult forces them to break off from browsing through social media profiles. Given such involvement by adolescents, attempts by the school to ban the use of smartphones in classrooms or to block access to social networks are increasingly alienating students, who find such bans strange. If we consider the fact that we were not able to find any differences in academic achievement between the respondents who obeyed such prohibitions and the ones that violated them (with the exception of participants in Olympiads, who usually do not look at their smartphones in class), then there is reason to question the reason for such bans.

Thus, the discovered fact that online and offline communications have converged can be understood in several meaningful ways: as demonstrating that these spaces are increasingly unified, as setting new requirements for research methodology, and as questioning the correctness and even the real enforceability of the school prohibitions on the use of social networks.

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